

FACE TO FACE: PERSONIFICATION, IDENTITY, AND SELF-PORTRAITURE
IN THE EARLY WORK OF CINDY SHERMAN

AND NIKKI S. LEE

By

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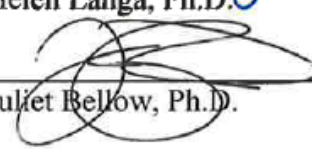
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I dedicate this thesis to the journey and my family who encouraged me to take it. This work could have not have been completed without their encouragement and kindness.
And, to Corover.

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ABSTRACT

Photographers Cindy Sherman (b. 1954, United States) and Nikki S. Lee (b. 1970, South Korea) challenge our ability to separate the real from the constructed in their respective series, *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980) and *Projects* (1997-2001). The present comparative study demonstrates how the two series blur the lines between art maker and art object, fact and fiction, intrinsic identity and adoptable personae, and, female and ‘other.’ In doing so, these series point back to the camera as a tool of systematic visual representation that creates the *familiar* cultural and gendered personae the artists perform via masquerade and impersonation. My research also extends beyond the artists’ visual and procedural similarities (and the distinctions between them) to consider the separate cultural and historical contexts that shaped their work – contexts that enabled women from different generations and cultural backgrounds to use their likeness and photography as vehicles to explore constructions of human identity.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: HIDING IN PLAIN VIEW

Imagine standing before a gallery wall, looking at two photographs from the late twentieth century hanging side by side. One photograph is a tightly cropped black and white image depicting a young woman quizzically surveying the soaring cityscape surrounding her [Fig. 1]. The other image appears to be a large color snapshot of six leather-clad adolescents on a sidewalk in an unknown metropolis [Fig. 2]. Both images look *familiar* but lack any certain definition or function. The first image mimics the imagery of glossy magazines or even an isolated frame from a film noir, given its deliberate and improbable perspective. The figures in the second image look directly at the viewer with seemingly self-conscious poses and slight, awkward smiles that suggest an indefinable, but intimate, relationship to the person taking the image. The two images also evoke, in slightly different ways, a quality of nostalgia or another time for the modern viewer. The image of the individual young woman looks particularly outdated due to the use of black-and-white film as well as the figure's vintage 1950s fashion. The group image appears less dated, but the grainy finish in the photos and the timestamp (which offers the viewer a specific date: February 27, 1997) suggest a photo taken with the sort of disposable, amateur camera popularized in the 1990s. If looking at these images fresh from the darkroom, without further contextualization, it would be challenging to recognize them as works of fine art. However, two practicing artists created these images and the artist responsible for each is provocatively visible within their respective photograph – albeit, hiding in plain view.

These photographs, *Untitled Film Still #21* and *The Punk Project (1)*, are part of two separate serial photography projects that were conceived and realized nearly twenty years apart. American photographer Cindy Sherman (b. 1954, New Jersey, United States) created the first image as part of her celebrated photographic series *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980). Nikki S.

Lee (b. 1970, Kye-Chang, South Korea) constructed the secondary image while working in New York for her *Projects* (1997-2001) series. Produced at the beginning of the artists' careers, these series similarly centered on each artist's manipulation of her own body and appearances to assume fictional identities that were then documented through a succession of narrative or quasi-narrative photographs. The resulting images from Sherman and Lee challenge the viewer's conceptions of 'reality,' while also questioning the cultural elements that frame our sense of an individual's identity. Further, the far-reaching impacts of Sherman's early acclaim in this mode of performance art and photography most likely influenced Lee's later investigation into similar concepts of masquerade. This study examines *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* and the series' overlapping and singular practices to compare the collective works' portrayal of cultural identity constructs, gender personifications, and the various 'looks' and theoretical interpretations of photography.

To decipher the overlapping and divergent concepts between the two efforts, this study first considers Sherman's photographic legacy in self-representation and her revolutionary challenge to the popular understanding of self-portraiture in the postmodern era. Sherman, who came to prominence as a photographer during the late 1970s and early 1980s, cast herself in various female tropes, or roles, popularized via the film industry and photography-based mass media, rather than depict any coherent form of the artist's personal identity. Sherman employed costumes, make-up, and even used props to suggest specific female prototypes such as the damsel in distress, the femme fatale, and the naïf, among many others. Once in character, she would take several photographs of her performance – sometimes using the help of an acquaintance to capture the scene. The resulting series of works in *Untitled Film Stills* call into

question accepted signs and stereotypes of feminine character and force viewers to question the origins of such accepted ‘looks’ of femininity.

In comparison to Sherman’s strategies, this research subsequently examines Lee’s work and the comparable use of her own figural representation as a tool to investigate contrasting elements of cultural ‘types.’ Like Sherman, Lee manipulates her physiognomy to masquerade as various social stereotypes and manifest into the recognizable characters seen in *Projects*. However, this series is more dependent upon external community environments and subcultural identifications that surround Lee to distinguish the exact ‘types’ that are depicted in the *Projects* photographs. Critical reviews have suggested that Lee spends weeks or even months infiltrating the social strata of the groups she mimics from trailer park tenants and teenage punks to erotic dancers, school children and other frequently stereotyped groups.¹ In doing so, she adopts the ‘looks’ and behaviors of each subculture with which she is photographed; as a result, Lee nearly becomes indistinct as an outsider. Once fully blended into the targeted, categorical group, Lee asks a bystander or group member to take photos of her surrounded by her new community and surroundings. While Lee’s presence in *Projects* presents recognizable *female* personae, much like Sherman, these photographs more forthrightly consider subcultural group dynamics upon the construction of individual identity and ultimately exploits societal desires to categorize groups of people into recognizable stereotypes. The characters Lee performs are framed within specific groupings of cultural, class, sexual, racial, and age parameters and these contexts of personification mark a significant difference between *Projects* and *Untitled Film Stills*.

¹ It should be noted that Lee *does* notify the people included in her images that she is an art student and will be photographing together for the art project (*Projects*) she is working on. The figures’ inclusion in the photographs is a mark of their willingness to participate.

After discussing each series individually, the last chapter looks at the two artists in tandem, specifically considering the different ways in which both artists make use of, and comments on, the photographic medium to create their works. The artists' use of differing technical strategies in *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* heightens the complex relationship between photographic representation and the fictive quality of 'truthfulness' that photography purports to present. Using their own bodies as models and platforms to communicate these concepts, Sherman and Lee lead the viewer to question if any sense of the photographer's actual self is included in these works. This disconnect between the photographic record as 'reality' and the artists' fabricated narrative images stand as one of the main challenges in *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* as it upsets photography's longstanding function as an intermediary between an individual's sense of self and its visual realization. The very photographic process of light traveling through a lens to fix a tangible object, landscape, or figure to paper reinforces the trace, or indexicality, that is associated with the medium. Photographs act as a testament to what was once visually present in front of the camera lens. However, artists like Sherman and Lee disrupt this paradigm and disable the accepted understandings of photography's aesthetics, theories and self-representation.

The present study employs a comparative approach to demonstrate how *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* blur the lines between art maker and art object, fact and fiction, intrinsic identity and adoptable personae, and, female and 'other.' In doing so, these series point back to the camera as a tool of systematic visual representation that creates the *familiar* cultural and gendered personae the artists perform. Further, Sherman's initial foray into these themes and the series' widespread popularity has created a tradition within the photographic medium. As such, considering these series side by side -- and face to face -- will begin to unravel the similarities

and differences between Sherman's processes and Lee's subsequent interpretation and possible modernization of such efforts. This research will also extend beyond the artists' visual and procedural similarities to consider the cultural and historical contexts that enabled two women from different generations and backgrounds to use their selfhood and the photographic medium as vehicles to explore the construction of human, and more specifically, female identity.

Literature Review

Scholars have considered various aspects of Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* at length but any thorough comparison to Lee's specific *Projects* series has not yet been explored. This may in part be due to the generational divide between these two artists. Further, the emergence of Lee's *Projects* (as well as other artists working within Sherman's legacy) allows scholars to see Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* in a new light. Critics and researchers have identified similarities between the two series but seem to restrict their interpretations to the artists' comparable use of 'dress up' and mimicry. However, there is a compelling gap in scholars' considerations of selfhood via representations of single figures in Sherman's photographs and group compositions in Lee's images. In other words, Sherman's self depictions of fictionalized, solitary female figures have not been evaluated in contrast to Lee's self depictions within groupings of larger cultural communities. Further, scholars interested in contemporary women photographers have explored the artists' shared notion of a malleable human identity, and have commented on the mutual practices of 'dress-up' to obscure the literal effects of self-representation. A deeper analysis is necessary to decipher how and why both artists sought out narrative self-photography as a means to explore the constructions of identity. Furthermore, the saturation of scholarship surrounding Sherman's position as both an icon of the new wave of 1980s feminist thought and postmodernism has yet to be considered in terms of artistic legacy. While more recent studies

regarding Lee's work have made comparisons between the two photographers, a more thorough analysis could focus on both artists' reinterpretation of the self-portraiture genre, varied approaches to the personification of gender, social constructions of identity, as well as shifts in feminist theory and other theoretical discourses that may or may not have influenced popular understanding of these two artists.

Within the existing scholarship, certain orientations and art-historical methodologies have shaped contemporary perception of Sherman's and Lee's photographs within the contexts of representational identity, use of the photographic medium and their shared practices of masquerade and 'dress-up.' Feminism in particular has provided a significant method of interpretation. In terms of Sherman and Lee, however, we must consider feminist theory in three distinct waves – early feminist thought of the 1970s, postmodernist deconstruction of the 1980s, and 'millennial feminism.'² Consequently, this thesis considers multiple sources to assess the shifts in feminist readings of both artists' portrayal of a constructed female identity. Semiotic readings of the *Untitled Film Stills* series consider the fundamental understanding of identity as a construction of signifiers but also of the photographic image itself. Select scholarship has considered the relationship between the symbols of identity presented in photography and the historical understanding of the camera as a signifier of reality. Yet other scholars have examined the psychoanalytical possibilities that are intrinsic to any artist's portrayal of selfhood. Scholars have opted to either briefly acknowledge (or, in some cases, fixate on) Sherman's manipulation of the self-portrait genre, and in doing so, present a psychoanalytic study of the artist in terms of narcissism, spectatorship, and sexuality; however, these same interpretations have not been applied to Lee. More common for Lee-specific scholarship is its focus on cultural difference and

² 'Millennial feminism' is a term I am using to describe the new generation of feminist scholars that have sought to make sense of the two conflicting early decades. Other scholars have identified this concept as a "third wave" of feminism however; from what I have observed thus far this term is unique to my research.

explorations of race as well as the supposed portrayal of cultural assimilation. The differences in scholarship are of particular interest as recurring patterns of interpretation are attached to ethnic-specific identities in Lee's work and gender-specific identities in Sherman's. Recent academic theses and dissertations have addressed these types of comparisons, but they tend to broadly consider the artists' oeuvres rather than a specific comparison of these two series.³ This study also examines a wide range of exhibition catalogues and reviews that consider generational comparisons of contemporary women photographers as well as monographic analysis of the artists' individual work. Lastly, this research has considered additional critical reviews, interviews and primary source information in order to frame certain contemporary understandings of both artists. Thus, this study draws on various mainstream media sources in part due to the limited scholarly analysis of Lee's work.

Significant shifts in feminist discourse developed between the two decades that separate the artistic careers of Sherman and Lee. Scholars and artists alike have negotiated the variable interpretations of Sherman's work in conjunction with postmodernism's deconstruction of an essential female identity. Norma Broude and Mary Garrard provide a foundation for an early feminist interpretation of Sherman's photographs in the introduction to their 1994 book, *The Power of Feminist Art*. According to the authors, feminist artists working in the 1970s introduced a previously ignored female experience to the artistic canon, but positioned Sherman and other 1980s artists as working against this trajectory to restore "old masculine constructs of the female body."⁴ Later feminist scholars, such as Eleanor Heartney and the co-authors of *After the*

³ See Matthew R. McKinney, "How Do I Look: Identity and Photography in the Work of Nikki S. Lee" (Master of Arts thesis, University of Georgia, 2006) and Thu-Mai Lewis Christian, "Mistaken Identities: The Photographic Conceptualization of Identity in Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* (1997-2001)" (Master of Arts thesis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2007).

⁴ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 28.

Revolution: Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art, suggest that Sherman and other postmodern feminists worked to expose rather than reify the social constructions that define ‘womanhood’ and ‘femininity.’ Further, these contemporary scholars argue that postmodernist shifts in feminist thought challenged the essentialism of first-generation feminists and led to the variations of feminist interpretations of Sherman’s work. Heartney concludes that Sherman’s greatest contribution stems from a “reintroduction of the pleasures of fantasy into an art world that often rejects pleasure as politically and ideologically suspect.”⁵ In reviewing these varying feminist interpretations of Sherman’s work, particularly in relation to the shifting debate of scholars overtime, this analysis shows how the intense debate surrounding Sherman’s work can fluctuate depending on the very scholars who evaluate the series.

A new generation of ‘millennial feminists’ have produced renewed interpretations that address the historiographical development of feminism as well as the theoretical discourses that frame Sherman’s visualizations of female identity. Danielle Knafo argues that women’s artistic self-representation refuses the consumption of the individual female body and offers “a physical and psychological presence seen through her [the artist’s] own eyes.”⁶ Knafo categorizes the varied interpretations of Sherman’s work into distinct subsets: a psychoanalytical emphasis on narcissism; post-modernists’ emphasis on fictional non-representations; and feminism’s emphasis on de-individualization of women. These varied interpretations, she suggests, offer unique understandings of Sherman’s work that can coexist with one another. While none of these feminist readings include an analysis of Lee’s work, it is important to understand the critical

⁵ Eleanor Heartney, “Cindy Sherman: The Polemics of Play,” in *After the Revolution: Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art*, eds. Eleanor Heartney, Helaine Posner, Nancy Princenthal, Sue Scott, (Munich & New York: Prestel, 2013), 178.

⁶ Danielle Knafo, *In Her Own Image: Women’s Self-Representation in Twentieth-Century Art* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009,) 16.

feminist response to Sherman as an overall meditation on the fashioning of female identity that can be applied to the work of both artists.

Some scholars have turned to the complex postmodern understanding of identity as a cultural construct to further dissect the content of *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects*. This interpretation of identity refutes earlier feminist assumptions of essential female qualities and argues that popular understanding of a gendered identity is something learned and constructed rather than intrinsic. Further, the role of photography and its alleged documentation of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ plays a role in the development of this line of inquiry and relates directly to these postmodern explorations of the female self and its visual representation. In Fiona Carson and Claire Pajackowska’s book *Feminist Visual Culture* photography is considered an agent in the production of what culture recognizes as social identity. The authors argue that the complexities of photography’s “politics of representation” are heightened when viewers equate the medium’s indexicality to certainty and suggest that photography has positioned femininity as a “...masquerade, something that had to be endlessly performed and reinvented.”⁷ The image-making process and mass distribution of photographs are also considered in Carol Squiers’ anthology, *OverExposed*. Like Carson and Pajackowska, Squiers is looking at photography’s specific capacity to influence modern consciousness. *OverExposed* includes an essay from Rosalind Krauss titled, “A Note on Photography and the Simulacral” and offers an interpretation of Sherman’s photographs as “total collapse of difference.”⁸ In other words, Krauss sees Sherman’s photographs as images that obscure a viewer’s ability to discern between the ‘true’ subject and the stereotypical character the artist acts out for the camera. In their post-structuralist interpretations, these scholars suggest a dematerialization of an essential identity through

⁷ Fiona Carson and Claire Pajackowska, eds., *Feminist Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 109.

⁸ Rosalind Krauss, “A Note on Photography and the Simulacral,” in *OverExposed: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, ed. Carol Squiers. (New York: The New Press, 1999), 177.

photography. They credit this idea in part to Sherman's images. This mode of interpretation could also be considered in Lee's contemporary use of the camera to deconstruct ideas of identity within an individual's cultural or even racial markers.

Other semiotic readings of Sherman's work look outside the medium of photography to consider the content of *Untitled Film Stills*. In her introduction to the anthology, *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts*, Griselda Pollock examines signifiers of difference through feminist interpretations of contemporary women artists and within the context of time (generations) and space (geographies).⁹ In her essay in the same volume, "The Knotted Subject: Hysteria, Irma and Cindy Sherman," Elisabeth Bronfen looks at the varied theoretical interpretations of Cindy Sherman's work and suggests shifts in the representation of codes. Bronfen appears to be mainly responding to the ideas of Ronald Barthes and Sigmund Freud and argues that Sherman's photography "performs a language of the body that moves ever more urgently towards the crisis of representation."¹⁰ In applying a semiotic methodology, Sherman scholars urge readers to look beyond the self-referential representation in *Untitled Film Stills* to consider more complex questions about the way identity is formed and understood in the postmodern era.

As previously mentioned, Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* casts a significant shadow that challenges many artists and theorists who interpret contemporary staged photography and self-representation. The extensive scholarship addressing Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* often compares the series to that of Sherman's contemporaries working in the 1980s. Scholar Amelia Jones, however, offers a more modern comparison in *Self/Image* and is one of the few scholars to

⁹ Griselda Pollock, ed., "Introduction" in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings* (London: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁰ Elisabeth Bronfen, "The Knotted Subject: Hysteria, Irma and Cindy Sherman," in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London: Routledge, 1996), 50.

address both the work of Sherman and Lee at length. In chapter two, “Beneath this Mask another Mask (Analogue and Digital Photography),” Jones looks at the performative images from Lee and Sherman, arguing that these works function as self-portraits because they “convey to the viewer the very subject who was responsible for staging the image.”¹¹ Jones acknowledges that both series present “unmanipulated,” analog photos (without using dark room editing) of the artists’ manipulated identities that use the ‘look’ of photographic medium itself as material for their images. However, Jones sees Lee’s images as a new “source” for the “simulacral effects of photographic (mis)representation” that is based on the categorization of cultural and “minority” identities.¹² Rather than primarily base her characters on gendered ‘looks’ and ‘types,’ Jones argues that Lee expands her exploration to include the constructions of a diverse range of racial, sexual, class, and ethnic identities. Similarly, Johanna Burton draws on Sherman’s work within the tradition of photographic representation but also considers the theoretical legacy developed around the artist (as seen in the discursive essays from Rosalind Krauss, Norman Bryson, and Douglas Crimp, among many others). Both Jones and Burton show the noticeable legacy Sherman’s oeuvre creates both in terms of photographers working with their own image and theorists addressing ideas of human identity.

Whereas scholars typically understand Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* series as a critique of mass media’s construction of female identities, the majority of the scholarship surrounding Lee’s work focuses on the artist’s assumed interest in cultural or racial identities. It is yet to be determined if this trend in scholarship relates to the artist’s own identity as a South Korean woman or due to the artist’s repeated exploration of race and ethnicity in *Projects*. Cherise

¹¹ Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 41. Jones also applies an extension of psychoanalysis to her reading of Sherman and Lee’s photographs via the writings of Ronald Barthes, Lacan, and Copjec.

¹² Jones, *Self/Image*, 66.

Smith's *Enacting Others* looks at the politics of identity and its historicity via the oeuvre of several contemporary artists. Combining semiotics and socio-historical analysis, the author suggests Lee was able to appropriate cultural signs (clothing, persona, etc.) and thereby consciously (and successfully) navigate across distinct identity and racial boundaries.¹³ In the last chapter, "Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* and the Repackaging of the Politics of Identity," Smith looks at Lee's first photographic series and her subsequent visual adaption of various identifiable cultural group identities. Smith concludes that Lee's presence in the photographs places her as "truly amidst the anonymous line-up of the group portrait" rather than demonstrating the "particularities of others."¹⁴ However, it is the very 'particularities' of the people with whom she surrounds herself that allows Lee to communicate to the viewer the idea of narrowly defined, cultural concepts of identity. Much like Sherman scholars, Smith also suggests that Lee's physical self-representation in the *Projects* series can be seen to function as both the subject *and* object of many of the photographs. This idea of representation aligns Lee's *Projects* with similar scholarly understandings of Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*. What is not addressed in Smith's analysis, however, is the idea of the personification of female identity in Lee's series. Sherman and Lee both approach the concept of female personae but they achieve their results through different frameworks – via the representation of the individual in the former and of the group in the latter. Unmistakably similar, however, is the artists' shared technique of inserting their own bodies into the frame as the means to perform these personae and it is this common ground that continues to place Lee within the orbit of Sherman's lineage.

However, self-representation in Sherman and Lee's serial works does not attempt to

¹³ Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Smith, *Enacting Others*, 230.

document their 'true' likeness but rather shows the malleability of human identity. While Sherman and Lee are each literally present in their photos, and also evoked in a variety of other ways, there is little resemblance to the traditional understanding of self-portraiture in their work. As seen in Smith's analysis of Lee, Loren Erdrich's essay, "I Am a Monster: The Indefinite and the Malleable in Contemporary Female Self-Portraiture," reiterates the idea of Lee's interest in cultural identity but considers this practice in relation to the figural use of the photographer's own body. However, Erdrich is not writing specifically about Lee's work but rather considering the reoccurring interest in the 'monstrous' and grotesque in renderings of selfhood that is found in staged contemporary photography. She suggests that these artists' willingness to portray themselves via alarming imagery calls attention to a Western preoccupation with difference and boundaries.¹⁵ This mode of representation among contemporary self-portraitists results in images that are "independent of life's widely accepted categorical divisions."¹⁶ The relatively recent publication date of the essay places Lee's work among the spectrum of contemporary artists that Erdrich reviews, however, where these artists use their self representation to shatter 'categorical divisions' within cultural identity, Lee seeks to unveil them. However, what connects Lee to this group of artists is their conceptual creation of various 'looks' that withhold a natural view of the artist and instead place an emphasis on the malleable aspects of identity. Additionally, many scholars have noted the underlying horror and quality of abjection in Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*. Erdrich's essay, in that sense, offers an additional connection between Sherman's legacy and more recent contemporary approaches to photographic self-representation as a means to explore the construction of human identity.

¹⁵ Loren Erdrich, "I Am a Monster: The Indefinite and the Malleable in Contemporary Female Self-Portraiture," *Circa* 121 (Autumn, 2007), 44.

¹⁶ Erdrich, "Monster," 44.

An evaluation of the generational correlations between contemporary photographers and their earlier counterparts is further examined in Anne Higonnet's essay, "Sally Mann: The Price of Success."¹⁷ While the author primarily examines the work and achievements of photographer Sally Mann, Higonnet also cites Lee's work as contemporary counterpart to Mann and part of a group of younger female artists "...who represent childhood photographically" and style themselves as "girls."¹⁸ Higonnet includes Lee within this group of young photographers who have been able to manage the "fundamental problems of representation and realism" in a way that suggests photographs do not "...have to be real to be true."¹⁹ Higonnet's consideration of the "truth of fantasy, fable, and myth, all guaranteed by childhood" offers a new viewpoint for Lee's *Projects* series and the identities she assumes.²⁰ In Higonnet's essay, fascination with and an exploration of cultural difference becomes a generational characteristic that places younger artists like Lee in a contemporary scene.

Parallel to the 'millennial feminist' scholarship inspecting cultural and gender difference in contemporary photography (Jones, Higonnet, and Erdrich), recent art reviews have also commented on Lee's work as a meditation on concepts of cultural difference. In a 2006 *New York Times* article, journalist Carol Kino argues that there is still plenty to learn from Nikki S. Lee and her various personae.²¹ At the time of publication, the review examined Lee's most recent project *A.K.A. Nikki S. Lee*, an hour-long faux documentary film. Kino's article illustrates the extent to which Lee presents the concept of 'faked' or constructed identities in her work and offers key details concerning Lee's earlier artistic endeavors (such as the fabrication of select

¹⁷ Anne Higonnet, "Sally Mann: The Price of Success," in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, eds. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006).

¹⁸ Higonnet, "Sally Man: The Price of Success," 423.

¹⁹ Higonnet, "Sally Man: The Price of Success," 424.

²⁰ Higonnet, "Sally Man: The Price of Success," 424.

²¹ Carol Kino, "Now in Moving Pictures: The Multitudes of Nikki S. Lee," *The New York Times*, October 1, 2006.

time stamps in *Projects*). Kino walks her reader through the film's progression and notes the fabricated as well as real happenings in *A.K.A.* These instances of 'staged' versus 'real' in the film document Lee's willingness to incorporate 'reality' into a 'fake' documentary and opens the possibility of recognizing similar practices in *Projects*. If the constructed as well as the authentic are included in Lee's film, could the same be suggested for *Projects*? At what point, if any, does Lee's interaction with the subcultures she infiltrates and photographs shift from fiction to fact, or vice versa? The article also provides useful primary information regarding Lee's interest in postmodernist literature and theory as well as a recent preoccupation with differences between the East and West in terms of identity. Lee suggests, in her interview with the journalist, that the West is concerned with identity of the individual while in the East identity is seen in terms of the group. This insight helps to clarify the differences that a juxtaposition between these two artists allows: both artists investigate the construction of identity, but where Sherman does through images of her singular body, Lee explores this principle in images that place her body in a group. Here, cultural difference is once again considered as an important distinction between Sherman and Lee's images, particularly in relation to Lee's depiction of groups.

The scope of literature concerning both artists uncovers and emphasizes the artistic lineage between Sherman and Lee. This problem of legacy is considered in another contemporary review from Jennifer Dalton, a visual artist and critic, and provides an analysis of photographic self-portraiture in the wake of Cindy Sherman's imagery. Dalton's review reflects on Lee's work and argues that Lee acts as a conceptual artist first and photographer second – a categorization, according to Dalton, that sets her apart from Sherman. To support this argument, Dalton points to Lee's artistic practice. While Lee may 'dress-up' and play a role as Sherman does, the former does not snap her own photos and suggests the resulting images "are

documentations of performances – proof that something happened...”²² However, the primary research conducted for this study shows that Sherman also often relied on the help of friends or family members to photograph the ‘performances’ that the artist created for *Untitled Film Stills*.²³ If we then agree with Dalton’s categorization of Lee as a conceptualist, we must also consider Sherman within this realm. Dalton further argues that *Projects* is Lee’s attempt to “make herself effectively invisible” through a sort of social camouflage and “constructed identity.”²⁴ Dalton ultimately suggests that the core of Lee’s work reveals a commentary on the fluidity and social construction of one’s class and cultural identity – one that cannot escape its attachment to the photographer’s own representation and thus, the legacy of Sherman’s oeuvre.

Given Sherman’s widespread popularity, as well as her long, successful career, many exhibitions have recently been mounted to retrospectively consider her work. At the end of 1995, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) acquired the entire *Untitled Film Stills* series and mounted an exhibition to highlight the acquisition. The exhibition catalogue includes reproductions of the whole photographic series as well as an introduction written by Sherman regarding the creation and development of the series.²⁵ Sherman states that she participated in the curatorial direction of the installed photographs as well as the images’ sequence in the catalogue. This detail sheds light on the artist’s intentions regarding the arrangement and vision of MoMA’s installation of the series. In 1997, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago held a retrospective of the artist’s entire oeuvre and their joined efforts presented the largest retrospective of Cindy Sherman’s work to date. The resulting

²² Jennifer Dalton, “Look at Me: Self-Portrait Photography after Cindy Sherman,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 22, No. 3 (September, 2000): 49.

²³ See Sherman’s own commentary on the production of *Untitled Film Stills* in David Frankel, ed. *Cindy Sherman: The Complete Untitled Film Stills* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 12 - 13.

²⁴ Dalton, “Look at Me,” 47.

²⁵ David Frankel, ed, *Cindy Sherman: The Complete Untitled Film Stills* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2003).

exhibition catalogue outlined the lineage of Sherman's artistic work while also examining the artist's exploration into the personification of female identity.²⁶ Three scholarly essays are included in the catalogue and discuss the relationship between viewer and artist in Sherman's photographs as well as the 'believable fiction' of her images. These retrospective efforts and the ensuing scholarship provide critical visual reference for *Untitled Film Stills* as well as access to primary source information surrounding the series' genesis.

More recent exhibitions have considered Lee and Sherman within the same context of contemporary female photographers. The National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA) presented *Role Models: Feminine Identity in Contemporary American Photography* in 2008 and included Sherman and Lee as leaders within two separate generations of contemporary photography. The catalogue suggests both generations of photographers independently capture "new approaches to and expressions of femininity as it relates to gender, sexuality and race."²⁷ The first generation of artists, according to NMWA, shows an interest in 'role-playing' as a means to call attention to stereotyped representations of women and the female identity while the second generation looks to the medium's emphasis on realism to navigate "the divide between conceptual and documentary photography."²⁸ The authors place Sherman in the earlier scene, while Lee is associated with the latter. The essays included in exhibition catalogue examine notions of the 'sense of self' in both artists' photographs as well as consider the camera's ability to record but also construct. In doing so, this exhibition reinforces the need for a more thorough

²⁶ Amanda Cruz, Elizabeth A. T. Smith, and Amelia Jones, *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective* (Chicago and Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1997).

²⁷ Suzanne G. Fox, ed., *Role Models: Feminine Identity in Contemporary American Photography* (London: Scala Publishers Limited, 2008), 2.

²⁸ Fox, *Role Models*, 2.

comparative study of *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* to extract the social and historical nuances that caused these common practices and interests in both series.

The majority of the scholarship regarding Sherman and Lee's work has focused on an analysis of cultural difference within a postmodern, semiotic framework. Scholars such as Amelia Jones, Rosalind Krauss, Johanna Burton, Cherise Smith, Danielle Knafo, and Eleanor Heartney all offer modes of interpretation that position these two artists outside the obvious comparisons of shared methods of 'dress up' and performative photographs. The present study uses these sources, as well as the others discussed, to move beyond the artists' common interests in self-representation, mimicry, and notions of constructed identities. Both *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* disrupt long-established relationships between self-representation and the self-portrait, the artist and the art object, and reality and make-believe. The photographs within *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* personify a myriad of cultural identities to call attention to the means of construction that define identity in the 'age of mechanical reproduction.' In doing so, these series point back to the camera as a tool of systematic visual representation that creates the *familiar* cultural and gendered personae the artists perform via masquerade and impersonation. While Sherman and Lee's photographs operate slightly outside reality despite always referring back to it. There is more than meets the eye in these photographs of Sherman's wide-eyed city girl and Lee's cadre of street punks. Much like the artists within the frames themselves, the underlying intentions of *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* may also be hiding in plain view.

CHAPTER 2

PHOTOGRAPHING THE FAMILIAR: CINDY SHERMAN'S

UNTITLED FILM STILLS (1977-1980)

As previously mentioned, this comparative study examines the work of Cindy Sherman and Nikki S. Lee, with a specific focus of their respective photographic series, *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects*. Such an analysis will establish how each artist approaches the personification of female identity, concentrating in particular on both artists' use of photography as a means to document a diverse range of sexed, classed, gendered, and clichéd personae. In order to establish a basis for this comparison, this chapter considers how Sherman, throughout *Untitled Film Stills*, acknowledges the camera's ability (as a mass media image-maker) to "collapse" the traditional representational parameters between the subject and object.²⁹ Throughout the series, Sherman turns the camera on her own physiognomy and uses her body and the camera to portray stereotypical female identities. Sherman, as an artist, was never the actual subject of these works – or so the prevailing scholarship has suggested. The obvious performances captured by the camera reveal and acknowledge the viewer's role in accepting stereotypical depictions of women in various forms of mass media. *Untitled Film Stills*, therefore, manipulates the indexicality of photography to create art works that reference the familiar looks and visualities of mass media while simultaneously critiquing them. In other words, the subject of the series is not the characters Sherman performs but rather the visual language of picture-taking itself where the photograph's content is fashioned to incite a more critical reading of gendered representations in mass media imagery.

²⁹ Krauss, "A Note on Photography and the Simulacral," 177. An idea this research expands upon that emerges from Krauss' evaluation of these photographs as a 'total collapse of difference.'

For all the complexities surrounding Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* series, research analyzing her work and the series' conceptual explorations can be grouped into categorical divisions. To posit the series' ability to exploit the medium's indexicality and reveal mass media's role in establishing ways of seeing, we must consider the following: the series' subject matter and appropriation of sources; shifting attitudes concerning the relationships between self-representation and self-portraiture; the varied theoretical and critical responses; and, the intersubjective relationship between Sherman as artist/subject and the viewer. The result will help decipher what elements of this iconic series caught the attention of art historians, artists, and the public alike, and more importantly, will try to determine why. The answers to this research will begin to identify the overlapping and divergent elements between the *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* series as a means to define Sherman's subject matter and Lee's later reconstruction of it.

Of course, Cindy Sherman did not invent the concept of self-portraiture in photography, nor the concept of the artist using her likeness to depict a persona other than her own; in both cases, Sherman built upon longstanding traditions. Consider, for example, the work of photographer Frances "Fannie" Benjamin Johnston (1864-1952) and her *Self-Portrait as a Man* (c. 1880 - 1900) [Fig. 3] or the fifteenth century 'self-portraits' of painter Artemisia Gentileschi (1593 – 1656) as an 'allegory of painting' [Fig. 4] or a 'female martyr' [Fig. 5]. Nevertheless, Cindy Sherman's photographs, particularly her earliest successful works from the *Untitled Film Stills* series, arguably established new ideas concerning photographic self-representation and interpretation as postmodernism gained its bearings. The latest generations of contemporary photographers working with their own image are all tied to Sherman's consequential photographic lineage. In fact, readers of contemporary scholarship would be hard pressed to find

examples of historians analyzing self-representation, identity or the personification of the female body *without* reference to Sherman's oeuvre. As Amelia Jones has noted, "much ink has been spilled over Cindy Sherman..." yet the theoretical trajectories and artistic legacies traced in this thesis make it possible to unveil new ways of understanding *Untitled Film Stills*.³⁰

To evaluate the series' appropriation of sources, it is beneficial to examine Sherman's background and the conditions from which *Untitled Film Stills* emerged. In 1954, Cindy Sherman was born in Glen Ridge, New Jersey and was raised in Huntington, Long Island, nearly 40 miles from New York City. Growing up, Sherman was enamored with television, particularly televised movies from by-gone eras and Hitchcock films.³¹ She also spent her time playing dress-up, and later, frequenting thrift shops and creating 'characters' from the treasures she would find. She began her artistic studies at the State University College at Buffalo, New York in the painting department, creating naturalistic self-portraits as well as drawing imagery from found photographs and clippings from magazines.³² Sherman's interests eventually shifted from painting to photography and the emerging field of conceptual art.³³ While in Buffalo, she was also introduced to contemporary art and artists through her classmates such as Robert Longo, an

³⁰ Amelia Jones, "Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman," in *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective*, ed. Amanda Cruz, Elizabeth A. T. Smith, and Amelia Jones (Chicago and Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1997), 33.

³¹ See Cindy Sherman, "The Making of Untitled" in *Cindy Sherman: The Complete Untitled Film Stills*, ed. David Frankel (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 5. Sherman cites the show *The Million Dollar Movie* in her introduction to this catalogue as one of the shows she obsessively watched. According to Sherman, the show repeatedly featured one movie per week "so you could really know it by heart." An IMDb search shows that the show primarily featured RKO Pictures films from the 1930s and 1940s such as *King Kong* (1933) and *Citizen Kane* (1941). In reference to Hitchcock, Sherman mentions *Rear Window* (1954) by name and particularly calls attention to the 'vignettes' seen in the apartment window surrounding the main character stating, "...you don't know much about any of those characters so you try to fill in the pieces of their lives..." This is an interesting correlation with the aesthetics of the *Untitled Film Stills* and the missing narratives the pictures seek to elicit.

³² Amanda Cruz, "Movies, Monstrosities, and Masks: Twenty Years of Cindy Sherman," in *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective*, ed. Amanda Cruz, Elizabeth A. T. Smith, and Amelia Jones (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997), 1.

³³ See Cruz for additional early biographical information and academic studies; Cruz has noted that Sherman had failed her introductory photography course as she was unable to 'pass' the course's technical and chemical aspects of creating the photographic print.

American painter and sculptor (who would later become a close friend and contributor to *Untitled Film Stills*).³⁴ All the while, her characters and exploration of ‘dress-up’ continued and evolved into a deeper inquiry for the artist. Sherman would often create a character in the studio/living space she shared with Longo and other artists and attend social gatherings while in character. Modern art historian Sam Hunter has pointed to these early interests in live performance, ‘dress-up,’ and conceptual art as the foundations for what later matures into Sherman’s performances in front of the camera for *Untitled Film Stills*.³⁵ When Sherman moved to New York after graduating from college, her artistic endeavors began to exclusively center on the creation of her characters and the resulting photographs that document those characters would later become *Untitled Film Stills*.

The origin of the series traces back more than thirty years. Cindy Sherman began the project in the fall of 1977 and often cites chance happenings as major contributors to the evolution and realization of the project. Earlier in the year, Sherman joined Longo for a visit to the studio of American painter David Salle where a photographic storyboard on his desk caught her eye. In the opening to the catalogue, *Cindy Sherman: The Complete Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman reflects on the making of the series and notes this discovery:

David worked for some kind of magazine that used photographs in a storyboard format, like a photo comic book or novella...they were quasi-soft porn, cheesecakey things and it was hard to figure out what was going on in any of them, they were totally ambiguous and I just loved that. This kind of imagery would solve my problem of trying to imply a story without involving other people, just suggesting them outside the frame: something clicked.³⁶

³⁴ Longo was one of Sherman’s friends and family members who would periodically take the pictures for Sherman while she was performing one of her characters for *Untitled Film Stills*.

³⁵Sam Hunter, John Jacobus, and Daniel Wheeler, “The Post-Modern Eighties: From Neo-Expressionism to Neo-Conceptualism,” In *Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Photography* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2004), 407.

³⁶ Sherman, “The Making of Untitled,” 6.

Sherman was looking for an outlet to move her characters beyond the singular performance in her studio to a realization of a recognizable, yet incomplete, story. Photography offered the means to do this while the ‘storyboard’ format provided the veiled narrative Sherman was looking for. The ‘click’ Sherman identified in pairing anecdotal ambiguity with the photographic document was ultimately realized with the ‘click’ of the camera’s shutter and the omission of what was or was not included from just beyond the frame.

Each photograph in *Untitled Film Stills* offers unique subject matter and photographic techniques; however an analysis of the series’ full imagery reveals repeating aspects. While more evident in some images than others, there is one essential and constant element included in all seventy photographs – the pictorial embodiment of Cindy Sherman. For the majority of the photographs, Sherman is the solitary figure within the frame and performs stereotypical female characters for the camera. The series’ photographs depict various recognizable characters that would remind contemporary viewers of female film noir characters or cinema typecasts. For today’s viewers it is important to remember that although the photographs suggest a former era, Sherman created these works between 1977 and 1980, thus, offering a form of nostalgia for her contemporary audience as well as a temporal distance.

The distance in time is also mirrored in the psychological distance of the female personae Sherman depicts. While only four photographs in the series show or suggest a figure in the frame other than Sherman (*Untitled Film Still* #5, 1977; *Untitled Film Still* #7, 1978; *Untitled Film Still* #15, 1978; and *Untitled Film Still* #64, 1980) [Fig. 6 through 9], only two (*Untitled Film Still* #17, 1978 and *Untitled Film Still* #33, 1979) [Fig. 10 and 11] offer a direct extradiagetic gaze

between the viewer and the subject.³⁷ Throughout the series, however, Sherman's personae consistently engage with a person, event or unknown entity that exists beyond the four-edges of the photograph. Amanda Cruz, curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, has suggested the "deliberate nature" of Sherman's poses act as a conscious acknowledgement of the unknown viewer's gaze.³⁸ In each photograph Sherman inserts her physiognomy to portray the main subject but also serves as an object of the gaze in her depictions of culturally stereotypical clichés of 'woman.' Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* offer deliberate poses, camera angles and even clothing choices that suggest the woman in the frame is self-conscious of the camera and the gaze that accompanies it. The various 'women' in *Untitled Film Stills* perform characters that are aware they are being watched. However, Sherman's appropriation and mimicry of cinematic 'looks' can also be attributed to these postures and the artist's attempt to awaken viewers to the sources of such gendered stereotypes. In this sense, Cruz is able to connect Sherman's work to the scholarship of Laura Mulvey and her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," arguing that the voyeuristic elements in *Untitled Film Stills* function as a larger part of the filmic tradition in which the "woman onscreen as the subject of the controlling male gaze and the object of masculine desire."³⁹ However, Sherman works against the male gaze in a variety of ways – such as her decision to adopt these 'looks' and 'types' from another era, thereby creating something that appears familiar, yet also challenges viewers to consider the origins of that reaction to the image.

³⁷ The term "extradiagetic" refers to the four different types of looking at a photograph as outlined by Victor Burgin in "Looking at Photographs" in *The Photography Reader* (London and NY: Routledge, 2003), 130-137.

³⁸ Cruz, "Movies, Monstrosities, and Masks," 3.

³⁹ Cruz, "Movies, Monstrosities, and Masks," 3. See also Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," [1973] in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992): 14-26.

Sherman's personifications of these familiar female characters span a diverse spectrum. Within this single series the viewer is offered images of female personae than can be categorized in generalized 'types' such as a domestic goddess (*Untitled Film Still #3*, 1977) [Fig. 12], distraught traveler (*Untitled Film Still #12*, 1978) [Fig. 13], precarious schoolgirl (*Untitled Film Still #14*, 1978) [Fig. 14], self-controlled matriarch (*Untitled Film Still #16*, 1978) [Fig. 15], wide-eyed city girl (*Untitled Film Still #21*, 1978) [Fig. 1], psychologically disturbed fiend (*Untitled Film Still #29*, 1979) [Fig. 16], sexualized object (*Untitled Film Still #36*, 1979) [Fig. 17], and drifter submerged in an autonomous metropolis (*Untitled Film Still #63*, 1980) [Fig. 17], among many others. The 'characters,' along with the costumes, props and locations that accompany them, are repeated throughout the series to form an overlying narrative. At the same time, Sherman works to disrupt any possible storyline: "Whenever I install any of the Film Stills in a group...I try to destroy any sense of continuum: I want all the characters to look different."⁴⁰ The series' enigmatic numerical titling at times evokes an narrative but Sherman suggests the numbers were a deliberate choice meant to obscure any sense of coherence: "I didn't want to title the photographs because it would spoil the ambiguity...the numbering basically went by year, but then it got mixed up as it became totally arbitrary, applied purely for purposes of identification."⁴¹ If we follow Sherman's lead and ignore instances where a narrative could be deciphered, as seen in the 'city-girl's' midday stroll in *Untitled Film Still #17* through *Untitled Film Still #20* [Fig. 10, 19, 20, and 21] for example, viewers are able to attach their own narratives to single images rather than pursue the sequential tendencies associated with serial

⁴⁰ Ibid., 7.

⁴¹ Sherman, "The Making of Untitled," 7.

projects.⁴² However, Sherman's directions and curatorial preferences cannot hide a unifying factor: each photograph includes the artist's likeness. We see her face (when her body is facing the lens) again and again and as such a narrative inevitably accumulates around Sherman herself. Her repeating likeness, coupled with her role as the artistic creator, incites a reading of Sherman's practices as the object being photographed as well as her concepts associated with such an approach. Here, the more overt storyline of her characters fail to distract viewers from Sherman's prominent position in these photographs. *Untitled Film Stills*' serial format and reiterative self-representational motif is therefore less concerned with communicating the various exploits of Sherman's characters but use the diverse set of stereotypes to call attention to viewer's zealous acceptance of false representations of womanhood.

If the overtly caricatured visualizations of gendered persona are not enough to convey the idea of stereotypical 'characters' in these photographs, Sherman judiciously titled the series to align it with the cinema. In associating these photographs with 'film stills,' the viewer is instructed to consider the depicted personae as actresses rather than 'real' women. But can this simple play of words fully explain Sherman's portrayal of various female stereotypes in *Untitled Film Stills*? As Arthur Danto has pointed out, Sherman's appropriation of the film still carries a distinct public understanding. Danto explains this "genre of [the] working photograph [the still]...is particularly rich in social associations," in terms of its function as publicity material for

⁴² The installation of *Untitled Film Stills* is an area that could benefit from additional research and interpretation; when installing the exhibition of the complete works in their numbered sequence, 'characters' such as the 'city girl' become recognizable in costume and location – as seen in *Untitled Film Still #17* through *Untitled Film Still #20*. Following this numerical sequence creates a narrative that is easier to distinguish than if they are installed out of order. However, there is a simpler, practical reason for the narrative that occurs when shown in the numerical sequence. Sherman photographed this series on rolls of film, often photographing the same 'character' on the same day and during the same performance. As a result, the sequence followed the developed film and the photographs were catalogued in the order they were developed and selected for inclusion in the series. Therefore, it could be argued that Sherman's interest in an ambiguous narrative was developed *after* her initial performances.

the film in question.⁴³ The film still gives potential audience members just enough visual information to determine if they want to commit time and money to the featured film. As such, it is not a freeze-frame from the actual movie but rather a strategic restaging of events to catch a viewer's attention and sell tickets -- what Danto describes as a "mass-culture artifact."⁴⁴ Sherman's appropriation of the film still references both the still *and* the ways of seeing associated with such an object of popular culture. Like Andy Warhol's print reproductions of newspaper-sourced 'Marilyns' or Roy Lichtenstein's comic strip-esque paintings, Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* use the 'look' of pop culture imagery to create something familiar while questioning the very authorship of such familiarity.⁴⁵

However, Danto's connection between Sherman's reference to the cinematic and the cultural object in *Untitled Film Stills* can be further refined. In reviewing Sherman's conceptual approach to these works, a particular film era and genre emerges that gives further insight into the source material Sherman was seeking out. As mentioned previously in this paper, critics have long made correlations between Sherman's stills and popular imagery from film noir cinema and B-movies from the 1950s and '60s. Sherman's recollection of her inspiration for the series, however, was more nuanced and cited specific 'looks' within the filmic tradition:

I was interested in...when they [the actresses] were almost expressionless. Which was rare to see: in film stills there's a lot of overacting because they're trying to sell the movie. The movie isn't necessarily funny or happy, but in those publicity photos, if there's once character, she's smiling. It was in European film stills that I'd find women who were more neutral...I didn't want to ham it up, and I knew

⁴³ Arthur Danto, "Photography and Performance: Cindy Sherman's Stills," in *Cindy Sherman: Untitled Film Stills*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), 8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁵ Specific examples of Warhol's and Lichtenstein's work respectively include *Golden Marilyn Monroe* (1962) which was based on a publicity still from one of the actress' movies and *Drowning Girl* (1963) that was in part constructed from comic book imagery.

that if I acted too happy, or too sad, or scared – if the emotional quotient was too high – the photograph would seem campy.⁴⁶

In using foreign B-movies and cultural associations of the film still as source imagery, Sherman was able to consider looks of femininity that were *familiar* yet not entirely recognizable as an exact movie, time, or place. The photographs' conflicting ambiguity and perceptibility awakens viewers to commonly accepted depictions of female 'types' in mass media that collectively transform woman into object. Sherman's appropriation and recreation of these constructed personae, with her own body as the model, unveils the cultural construction of female identity and links its creation to the proliferation of contemporary imagery found in mass media, film, and advertising.

Another perhaps less recognized source for the *Untitled Film Stills* series can be found in the work of emerging video and performance artists of the 1970s. Artists working within such mediums were also using appropriation to critique society and turned modern modes of seeing reflectively back on themselves. Sherman has noted the possibility for such influences as well:

I was into conceptual, Minimal, performance, body art, film – alternatives. In the mid-70s the art world didn't seem to me as macho as it began to feel in the later '70s and early '80s, but maybe that's because there were artist role models around like Lynda Benglis, Eleanor Antin, and Hannah Wilke. Just the fact that they had a presence made a difference.⁴⁷

Sherman cites the 'presence' of Benglis, Antin, and Wilke as having an impact on her work. As practicing video artists, all three were exploring some of the same themes that video art historian and curator JoAnn Hanley has outlined in the history of the medium. Hanley argues that the restrictions placed on women in the traditional arts were absent from the video media of the

⁴⁶ Sherman, "The Making of Untitled," 8.

⁴⁷ Sherman, "The Making of Untitled," 5. Note all the artists Sherman references were experimenting with video and performance art at the time.

1970s and allowed women video artists to begin exploring some of the same ideas Sherman would later pursue in *Untitled Film Stills*:

Women video artists were freer to concentrate on process, often using video to explore the body and the self through the genres of history, autobiography, and examinations of gender identity. Women also used the new medium to create social and political analyses of the myths and facts of patriarchal culture, revealing the socioeconomic realities and political ideologies that dominated everyday life.⁴⁸

Video artists (and many other feminist artists of the time) were creating works that spoke to the objectification of women, and, like *Untitled Film Stills*, these video works documented both the performance of female personae while simultaneously calling attention to the medium that created the images. Although working in a different medium, Sherman was considering the work of these video artists and the ways they unveiled the illusions of a patriarchal society. Traces of these pioneering video artists can be seen in what Sherman begins to address in *Untitled Film Stills* – a desire to upend visual assumptions about the cultural identity and visualities of womanhood.

Where the video artists worked with a new form of media that operated outside mainstream artistic conventions, Sherman's decision to use photography and her own body placed *Untitled Film Stills* within a complicated tradition of self-representation and its alignment to self-portraiture. The particularities of understanding human representation through photography adds another layer to Sherman's work that artists including Lee continue to explore today. As T.J. Clark has recognized, self-portrayal offers a kind of knowing, "We have acquiesced in an equation of seeing with knowing and visa-versa, one that is built deep into our accounts of the

⁴⁸ Quote from JoAnn Hanley, the curator of the 1993 exhibition, *The First Generation: Women and Video, 1970-1975*. See Laura Cottingham, "New Wine into Old Bottles: Some Comments on the Early Years of Art Video," in *Outer & Inner Space: Pipilotti Rist, Shirin Neshat, Jane & Louise Wilson, and the History of Video Art*, ed. John Ravenel, (Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Art, 2002), 8.

world...”⁴⁹ Using her own body as the object/subject of the *Untitled Film Stills* photographs, Sherman is recalling the tradition of self-portraiture while simultaneously overturning the genre’s association with true selfhood and reality. In doing so, the series challenges the viewer to ask if *any* photographs in *Untitled Film Stills* are self-portraits or if Sherman’s presence represents something different.

Scholars have reflected on this aspect of Sherman’s work and drawn dissimilar conclusions. Joanna Woodall explores the historical traditions of portraiture and the ‘contingency’ and ‘authority’ of physiognomic likeness that Sherman’s photographs actively pervert.⁵⁰ She notes that the twentieth century brought an end to ‘naturalistic portraiture’ and denied long-held beliefs that portraiture’s visual rendering had to mimic the figural exactness of the subject to depict their identity. Drawing on the historicity of the genre, Ernst van Alphen notes that Sherman’s deliberate examination of the genre of self-portraiture in *Untitled Film Stills* undoes the “standard relation between subject and representation,” and produces “a photograph of a subject which is constructed in the image of representation.”⁵¹ This suggests that any sense of ‘self’ is removed from *Untitled Film Stills* and in turn is replaced with photographs that reference the very act of photo-taking itself. However, Amelia Jones argues that the series’ performative images function as self-portraits because they “convey to the viewer the very subject who was responsible for staging the image.”⁵² Jones also acknowledges that the performative element of such images significantly alter public understanding of what is

⁴⁹ T.J. Clark, “The look of Self-Portraiture” in *Self-Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary*, ed. Anthony Bond and Joanna Woodall (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 2005), 59.

⁵⁰ Joanna Woodall, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 1-5.

⁵¹ Ernst Van Alphen, “The Portrait’s Dispersal: Concepts of Representation and Subjectivity in Contemporary Portraiture,” in Joanna Woodall, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 244.

⁵² Jones, *Self/Image*, 41.

considered a ‘self-portrait’ as well as the ‘subject’ that is represented.⁵³ Sherman’s images thus work to erode, but also to redefine, assumptions associated with the photographic self-portrait and photographs of an artist at work. Many scholars have indeed contended that there is not one self-portrait in the nearly 70 photographs featuring Sherman in *Untitled Film Stills* -- but can we be so sure?

Although Sherman finished taking photos for the *Untitled Film Stills* series in 1980, the series in its complete form was not realized until The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) acquired the entire collection of images in the 1990s. Originally, the series included sixty-nine small (8 x 10 inches) black-and-white photographs but in mounting the 1997 MoMA exhibition, *Cindy Sherman: The Complete Untitled Film Stills*, the artist added an additional print to the series: *Untitled Film Still #62* (1977) [Fig. 22]. This was a significant change for a body of work that was ‘completed’ more than 15 years earlier but remains an element of the series that is consistently overlooked in contemporary analysis. Evaluating *Untitled Film Stills* without this last image would be to ignore Sherman’s marked gesture to formally ‘complete’ the visual program of the series.⁵⁴ As previously mentioned, countless scholars have suggested not one self-portrait of Cindy Sherman exists within the series; however, a closer analysis of *Untitled Film Still #62* shows the photograph could in fact be the only piece of self-portraiture in *Untitled Film Stills*, or at very least, the closest thing to it.

In her published reflections on making the series, Sherman walks readers through her artistic process and literally sheds light on a subtle yet important detail:

The lighting in the whole series was also extremely basic. I rarely used a flash, and still don’t. I just had some cheap light bulbs screwed into...clips on crappy

⁵³ Jones, *Self/Image*, 41.

⁵⁴ As such, I consider *Untitled Film Stills* a series of 70 photographs rather than 69 and will be evaluating the project accordingly.

old tripods – I think I used two. That was my source of light, along with whatever existing light there was.⁵⁵

Interestingly, *Untitled Film Still #62* shows Sherman, on the floor of her studio apartment with the very clipped lights and tripod she mentions. The light almost blinds the viewer and skews the exposure of the film. What Sherman presents in #62 is not a character but herself as an artist and in the midst of her craft. We see the tools of her craft – lighting, props, costume – and the assumed artifice is made very real and part of who she is as an artist.

When looking collectively at the other interior, domestic setting photographs in the series, *Untitled Film Still #62* has the most amount of personal effects included within the frame. With the exception of the outdoor photographs, the majority of the series was captured within Sherman's studio apartments:

Throughout the series I would shoot in my living space, which was also my studio. I'd drape fabric over the bed to disguise it, or I'd hang curtains in the background to hide my tiny darkroom. I tried to think of ways to make the loft look like it could be other places – perhaps a hotel room, or the lobby of some kind of apartment building...⁵⁶

Untitled Film Still #62 shows Sherman's living space as it actually was, not manipulated or disguised to resemble another location. Books are strewn across the floor, a stemless wine glass sits on the coffee table beside her, a desk (*her* desk) appears to be covered with an arsenal of make-up, and a calendar hangs above it on the wall. Sherman poses herself seated on the floor, her body turned away from the camera but contorts her torso so her eyes directly return the camera's and the viewer's gaze. Regardless of the fact that the lights behind Sherman obscure her face, there remains many other cues that suggest this image could be interpreted as a self-

⁵⁵ Sherman, "The Making of Untitled," 10.

⁵⁶ Sherman, "The Making of Untitled," 10. This quote from Sherman also references the exact locations of Sherman's work space and could prove useful information for subsequent research: "At first I lived on John and South Street: all the interiors up until 1979 were shot there. Then I was in a little place on Fulton, where all the others are from (except the ones on location)."

portrait. The identity of the artist is dependent on the concept of revealing both her studio and her photographic practice to at once show the artifice of her images as well as the reality of her efforts. *Untitled Film Still #62* can in this sense certainly be interpreted as a self-portrait. Much as Artemisia Gentileschi presented herself with her palette and paintbrushes in hand as an *allegory* of painting [Fig. 4], Sherman depicts herself as in a performative figuration of her own identity: a conceptual and performance artist within her own studio.

In addition, Sherman's gesture of adding the photograph to the MoMA collection nearly 15 years after the original sixty-nine *Untitled Film Stills* were gathered into a series could suggest that the artist felt something was missing from this body of work. As such, it is acceptable to wonder what elements of this picture influenced Sherman to include it so many years later. Unlike other sub-narratives within the series such as the 'city girl,' #62 stands alone. The persona Sherman depicts in this photograph is not repeated anywhere else in the series and the wig she is wearing is unlike any other shown throughout *Untitled Film Stills*. The story Sherman tells through this late edition also offers a new way to approach the idea of self-portraiture in *Untitled Film Stills* and dates back to the artist's first roll of film for the series. Sherman states that this first roll produced six photographs, *Untitled Film Still #62* included, that were installed in one of the artist's early group shows:

After that I lost track of the negatives, I never knew what happened to them, they just sort of disappeared...so for years after, when I wanted a copy of one of them, I'd rephotograph the photograph. Maybe ten or fifteen years later someone at Hallswalls [the location of the aforementioned group show] got in touch with me, saying, we've found this roll of film we think is yours.⁵⁷

As Sherman's career was beginning to form, it would be logical that one of the six photographs from this early show would directly point to her artistic process. Sherman wanted her viewers to

⁵⁷ Sherman, "The Making of Untitled," 7.

see her as a serious conceptual artist that performs the characters she creates for the camera and captured a photograph that illustrated her artistic identity as such. This photograph was personal for Sherman and although it was lost, it resurfaced: “On the long-lost original contact sheet, there was one I’d always meant to add [to *Untitled Film Stills*], so it now becomes the seventieth film still. In keeping with the arbitrary numbering, however, it is #62.”⁵⁸ With the emergence of the ‘long-lost’ contact sheet, Sherman was able to complete the *Untitled Film Stills*. This particular photograph, whether for its depiction of Sherman as a practicing artist in her studio or because of its status as an originating photo from the first roll of *Untitled Film Stills*, carries significance for Sherman and stands out among the other sixty-nine photographs. In this sense, Sherman uses #62 as an painter would sign a canvas. *Untitled Film Still #62* converges on authorship and presents what can arguably be considered the only true self-portrait in series.

This previously overlooked inquiry into *Untitled Film Still #62* supports the need for a renewed investigation into the larger series. A contemporary review of *Untitled Film Stills* should also consider the course of theory and critical response relating to the project, and in turn, has the potential to unearth new ideas about Sherman’s landmark series. It is clear that elements of Sherman’s images from *Untitled Film Stills* series struck a chord. Not only for other artists such as Nikki S. Lee who have built upon it, but also for theorists who have interpreted Sherman’s works in a myriad of methods and reached extremely diverse conclusions. The multitude of critical theory and readings of *Untitled Film Stills* has impacted the way art historians understand the project today. Johanna Burton has noted the extent of the scholarship surrounding the series and how the scope of so many interpretations lends additional intrigue into the artist’s oeuvre, “Sherman and her work are often discussed in terms of postmodern theories

⁵⁸ Sherman, “The Making of Untitled,” 7. The numbering was assigned by Sherman’s gallery at the time, Metro Pictures.

and ideas that were coming to increasing prominence as her career began – feminism, subjectivity, mass media, new forms of mechanical reproduction, and even trauma, among others.”⁵⁹ Amelia Jones has also noted these varied receptions to Sherman’s work and suggests it reflects back on society as much as the work itself: “Sherman’s work is itself a *lens* through which to view contemporary art and its ongoing concern with the profound issues of the structures of the self – with how we experience and conceive ourselves in the contemporary world.”⁶⁰ As such, the social and historical contexts surrounding the development of *Untitled Film Stills* require additional consideration to evaluate the many theoretical interpretations of Sherman’s work.

At the end of the 1970s and the start of the 1980s, postmodernism was structuring the theoretical framework of the day. As a result, Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* were interpreted under a postmodern lens but the series could also be seen as a response to postmodern ideas surrounding the construction of personal identities. Many critics and scholars have associated *Untitled Film Stills* with postmodern theory that offered an overall disregard and “critique of the modernist faith in authenticity, value, and originality.”⁶¹ As Eleanor Heartney has suggested, many of the ideas seen in Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* can be tied to this element of postmodernism and this supports the notion of Sherman’s role as an icon of postmodernist thinking. Further, Heartney examines multiple shifts within feminism and argues that Sherman’s photographs (as well as the work of other postmodern feminist artists) exposed the social

⁵⁹ Johanna Burton, ed. *Cindy Sherman*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), Afterword.

⁶⁰ Jones, “Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman,” 34.

⁶¹ Eleanor Heartney, Helaine Posner, Nancy Princenthal, Sue Scott, *After the Revolution: Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art* (Munich & New York: Prestel, 2013), 18.

fabrications of ‘womanhood’ and ‘femininity’ to deconstruct the essentialist ideals of the first generation of feminists.⁶²

However, early feminist scholars Norma Broude and Mary Garrard have argued that feminist art and theory accounts for several early ruptures of conventional wisdom that gave birth to postmodernism. They state that this can be seen in four cultural advancements following feminism’s emergence: popular understanding of gender as a social construction rather than a natural occurrence; the integration of craft, video and performance art into the strata of ‘high-art;’ a challenge to the Western art world’s cult of ‘genius’ (and its male dominant underpinnings); and, finally, the introduction of pluralism in artistic scholarship that allows for more than one accepted viewpoint in the analysis of art history.

Other modern art scholars such as Sam Hunter place Sherman within the spectrum of ‘Neo-Conceptualism’ and define the movement as a “theory-dense subtext, together with a still more pronounced reversibility of fact and fiction...”⁶³ Hunter and his colleagues make strong arguments for Neo-Conceptualists’ relation to Walter Benjamin’s concern with the spectacle of modern life and its ability to “transform productive individuals into abject consumers... entertained but also hopelessly deceived...”⁶⁴ Hunter and other scholars have also suggested that Sherman’s photographs, featuring her own physiognomy, function as a narcissistic gesture and seek psychoanalysis as a method to interpret *Untitled Film Stills*. Given this multiplicity of interpretations, select scholars (Jones, Heartney, and Burton among them) have suggested that the diversity of critical views surrounding Sherman’s work stands as a testament to and evidence of the subjective nature of viewers’ responses to *Untitled Film Stills*.

⁶² Heartney, “Cindy Sherman: The Polemics of Play,” 171 – 173.

⁶³ Hunter, *Modern Art*, 407.

⁶⁴ Hunter, *Modern Art*, 407.

Across the spectrum of *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman serves, first and foremost, as a protagonist – a character staring back at the viewer. Sherman disrupts the illusion of a passive object of the viewer's gaze in a visual culture burdened with loaded, albeit accepted, imagery. *Untitled Film Stills* is an acknowledgment of the myth factory of mass media but also a challenge to it. As Jones argues, the feminine masquerade Sherman elicits “takes on with a vengeance all of the myriad surfaces of femininity, which the gaze wants to corral into ‘woman’” and lays bare the mass media's formulaic code that has been situated as universal definitions of womanhood.⁶⁵

As previously mentioned in Mulvey's interpretation of the cinematic objectification of women, the viewer's gaze as well as Sherman's position as the object of the gaze in *Untitled Film Stills* remains another element of the varied critical evocations. Sherman's theoretical and literal realization of masquerade challenges what Jones describes as the “patriarchal gaze of the West.”⁶⁶ A large part of my argument centers on Jones' interpretation of Sherman's work in relation to the camera and the “projective eye” that “gazes purposely” at its subjects.⁶⁷ This projective eye, as Jones describes it, is at once “violent and penetrative” in its attempt to transform the human body into an object for consumption.⁶⁸ Jones suggests the projective gaze has been transformed (and also arguably heightened) through the mechanical reproduction of the

⁶⁵ Jones, “Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman,” 38.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 36.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 35. For more information regarding the particular avenue of Sherman's work that Jones suggests has been overlooked, see *Retrospective*, 36: “...the situatedness of her [Sherman's] work – its embeddedness in a rich context of work (much of it feminist) addressing the ontology of the subject and the politics of its identifications through the enactment of the artist's body (the relationship of the self to the world and its others, and the role of representation and reproducibility in conditioning the particularized subject).” While Jones considers select works throughout the duration of Sherman's career, I have considered this interpretation for only the *Untitled Film Stills* series and applied them for the first time to Lee's *Projects*. However, the ‘projective eye,’ I would argue, has long influenced visual culture and is not a twentieth century phenomenon. Sherman and Lee's work provides another contemporary example but the politics of identity in photography have existed since the advent of the camera, and even extend beyond that to other artistic mediums that illustrate naturalistic visual representations of the human form.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 35-36.

camera and other mass image-making devices. In applying this interpretation to *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman appears to be very much aware of the influence of the ‘projective eye’ and incorporates this idea into her photographs to (unconsciously or consciously) alert viewers to the existence of aggressive and intrusive imagery that often fixates on the female body. Instead of being the victim of the gaze as many scholars have suggested, the overtly staged depictions of Sherman’s characters effectively refuse the projective gaze as Jones defines it. Ultimately, Sherman’s photographs reference the representational systems within the patriarchal visual culture that place a sexed or authoritative reading of ‘other’ via narrowly defined, but keenly familiar, characterizations.

To acknowledge the projective eye and the representational codes it creates is also to acknowledge the role and desires of the viewer in this paradigm. As such, the external gaze relies on an “intersubjective dimension” that has previously been overlooked in evaluating Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills*.⁶⁹ Jones argues that the “subject...is never complete within itself but is always contingent on others...” or, in other words, the *Untitled Film Stills* characters are dependent on the viewer’s experience to make their meaning known.⁷⁰ The challenge of the projective eye and intersubjective relationships are also at work in Lee’s *Projects* and places these two series into the same spectrum. There is a reason the works in the respective series both seem *familiar* and influence of a projected yet intersubjective gaze could very well be accountable for the familiarity. Sherman and Lee manipulate the photographic document to expose the visual language of the medium but where Sherman’s photographs rest on intersubjectivity between the image and the viewer, Lee’s works depend on the intersubjective relationships among the figures in the frame. The photographs from Lee’s *Projects* analyze the

⁶⁹ Ibid., 40.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 40.

group dynamics of identity and personae that extend beyond gendered enactments dependent upon the projected gaze of its viewers. Plainly speaking, the figural photographic groupings of Lee's *Projects* shift the intersubjectivity from the viewers outside the frame to the figures included within it.

CHAPTER 3

THE SUM OF ITS PARTS:

NIKKI S. LEE'S *PROJECTS* (1997-2001)

This chapter examines Nikki S. Lee's *Projects*, considering the series as a possible reinterpretation of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*. While there are significant similarities between the two efforts, the artists' documented 'performances' of various sexual, racial, class and gender stereotypes speak to their separate beliefs surrounding identity and identity formation as well as the representational systems that influence such concepts. The photographs in both series point back to the camera as an instrument of visual culture that creates imagery capable of segmenting personhood into narrow cultural categorizations and stereotypes. However, the two series diverge in the ways they designate and communicate which elements of identity are impacted by pervasive images of popular culture, and thus it is clear that the two artists use self-referential photographs to emphasize different ends. As chapter two shows, Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* series manipulates photography's strong connection to indexicality as a means to upend mass media's fictitious imagery of womanhood and, in doing so, uses the artist's own body to concurrently challenge ideas surrounding human identity. Begun nearly twenty years after Sherman's series, Lee's *Projects* reinterprets the indexicality paradigm constructed in the *Untitled Film Stills*, extending it beyond gender to address a wider, more complex range of cultural identities that are situated within various grouped settings that Lee infiltrates, mimics, and later captures on film. The collective images portray Lee perfectly immersed within diverse groupings of subcultures, thereby disrupting given assumptions about the formation of selfhood – and, perhaps more importantly, the way it is depicted in photographic images. Throughout the series Lee acts out distinct personae but it is through the addition of her supporting cast (the supplementary people and communities within the frame)

that her adopted identity is made recognizable for viewers. Lee recognizes this element of the series, acknowledging, "...that's the underlying concept: other people make me a certain kind of person. It's about inner relationships and how those really address the idea of identity."⁷¹ Lee's shifting identities, in other words, can only be understood within the fuller environmental contexts that these photographs collectively capture. However, in reviewing this material a question emerges: Does *Projects* indeed break down cultural stereotypes, or do these images actually reinforce them? While it may not be possible to arrive at a satisfactory answer to this question, Lee's *Projects* certainly suggest that the whole (or group) of human identity is greater than the sum of its parts (or individuals).

Lee's particular interest in positioning her masqueraded body among a figurative group can be traced to her early interests in performing characters and transforming her own identity. Lee moved from Korea in 1994 to study commercial photography at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. She later enrolled in the Master's photography program at New York University and it was during this time that the first photographs for *Projects* were taken.⁷² When Nikki S. Lee created the series between 1997 and 2001, she had only been "Nikki S. Lee" for three years. She changed her given name, Lee Seung-Hee, after moving to America. Lee had wanted an "American" name when she began her new life in the United States and selected "Nikki" from a collection of names a friend provided from *Vogue* magazine.⁷³ As such, one of her first acts in the United States was taking on a new identity; one that is different, at least in

⁷¹ Nikki S. Lee as quoted in Gilbert Vicario, "Conversation with Nikki S. Lee," in *Nikki S. Lee: Projects*, ed. Lesley A. Martin (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2001), 100 - 101.

⁷² Jana Reena, "Lee, Nikki S.." *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed March 2014, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/subscriber/article/grove/art/T2090440>.

⁷³ From the list of names sent to Lee in advance of her move to America, it is suggested "Nikki" was in reference to the model Niki Taylor who was featured in *Vogue* magazine at that time. See Ferguson, "Let's be Nikki," 17.

namesake, from the original Lee Seung-Hee. Lee's interest in malleable identities is therefore as much a part of her identity as her artistic profession:

Changing myself is a part of my identity. That's never changed. I'm just playing with forms of changing. My work is really simple, actually. I wanted to make evidence, as John Berger calls it. I always feel like I have a lot of different characters inside and I was curious to understand these things. I wanted to see some sort of evidence that I could be all those different things.⁷⁴

The 'evidence' that Lee describes here is later realized in the various characters and stereotypes she performs for the camera in *Projects*. Her ambitions to showcase these characters in turn influence Lee's subsequent organization of the endeavor.

While Lee and Sherman both organize their photographs into a serial format, *Projects* is divided into subsections, or subseries, that specifically state the cultural communities to which the photographs correspond. The 2001 monograph, *Nikki S. Lee: Projects*, includes twelve similarly stereotypical cultural categorizations that function as individual subtitles or subseries within the larger body of work: *The Punk Project*, *The Tourist Project*, *The Young Japanese (East Village) Project*, *The Lesbian Project*, *The Hispanic Project*, *The Yuppie Project*, *The Swingers Project*, *The Seniors Project*, *The Ohio Project*, *The Exotic Dancers Project*, *The Skateboarders Project*, and *The Schoolgirls Project*.⁷⁵ In all, the *Projects*' subseries and their descriptive (even instructive) subtitles offer little of the ambiguity Sherman was seeking in titling her *Untitled Film Stills*. This specificity in the subtitling of her images supports Lee's proclaimed interests in categorically examining the "different characters inside" herself – as if creating an inventory of stereotypes she set out to methodically explore. *The Lesbian Project*

⁷⁴ Nikki S. Lee as quoted in Vicario, "Conversation with Nikki S. Lee," 100.

⁷⁵ Interestingly, the monograph does not include the first subseries, *The Drag Queen Project*, or the privately funded concluding subseries, *The Hip Hop Project*. These two additional subseries are cited regularly in mainstream media references to *Projects* but are not included in this larger monograph that was organized in conjunction with the artist. Therefore, *Projects* includes fourteen subseries rather than the twelve listed in the monograph.

(14) [Fig. 23], for example, is one photo from a subsection of multiple images titled *The Lesbian Project*. In this photograph, Lee (who is heterosexual) performs as a homosexual female and is shown in an intimate act with a woman (whom we are led to presume is homosexual). In titling the subseries *The Lesbian Project*, Lee makes it clear that she is adopting a persona, thus reminding the viewer that these images do not depict a natural or essential representation of the artist but rather captures Lee ‘in character.’ Conversely, the other ‘character’ in *The Lesbian Project* (14) is not (or may not be) a ‘character’ at all but the everyday identity of the additional subject.⁷⁶ This woman’s identity therefore functions as a definition of Lee’s performed persona. *The Lesbian Project* (14) relies on the intersubjectivity of the other figure’s personhood to communicate how viewers should read the image but also suggests that the other figure’s identity as a homosexual female is something that can be performed. In placing the artist’s likeness within the same space and adopting same appearance as various subcultural groups, Lee’s images and the characters she performs rely on association with the other figures inside the frame to create a sense of the familiar for the viewer.

Despite the varying discourse among scholars, commentaries regarding Lee’s practice largely establish her as a conceptualist but note that her work relies on a long history of staged photography. In fact, many scholarly references to Lee’s work cite Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* as a possible source of influence and suggest that Lee’s process of adopting personae is cut from the same (albeit more elaborate) cloth. Ferguson, for example, notes Lee’s lineage from Sherman’s works but also tries to separate them and argues:

There is a strong tradition of self-transformation in art, most prominently represented today by the work of Cindy Sherman. It is important to note, however that although early in Sherman’s career she sometimes wore various costumes or

⁷⁶ Various scholars and the artist have confirmed that the other figures in Lee’s images are not actors but it is not certain if all the figures in Lee’s images are performing certain roles as well.

disguises out in public, her practice has been overwhelmingly conducted alone in her studio. Lee works only in public, in direct relationship to others, never in the studio.⁷⁷

As discussed earlier in this thesis, however, Sherman occasionally worked outside her studio/apartment and captured a fair number of the *Untitled Film Stills* photographs with the assistance of others. Moreover, attempts to distance *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* is further eroded when considering that Lee's "direct relationship to others" is situated as a temporary assignment that is made openly known to the other figures in her photographs.⁷⁸ In this sense, the streets, public spaces, and environments Lee documents in *Projects* are as much a working studio as Sherman's apartment. Both spaces develop the scene that the respective artists portray while also reinforcing the personae the respected series presents.

Projects also departs from *Untitled Film Stills* in figural representation and setting. As previously mentioned, the *Untitled Film Stills* series regularly shows Sherman's characters alone and in her studio apartment while *Projects* primarily depicts Lee among a group of her 'peers' in an environment that marks the subcultures she performs, although there are exceptions to both rules. Lee, much like Sherman, inserts her own body into carefully planned situations, but Lee's resulting photographs more closely resemble group portraits than a representation of a singular, gendered construction of self. Where Sherman's performances of female personae primarily examine gender and sexual stereotypes, Lee takes on a broader range of identities that require her to temporarily alter her 'real' sexuality, class, gender, race, and even age. Lee wears specific clothes, adopts deliberate demeanors, and poses herself among a certain crowd to help viewers identify the character she performs. Lee's transformations from drag queen to Korean schoolgirl,

⁷⁷ Ferguson, "Let's Be Nikki," 13.

⁷⁸ As referenced in the larger quote above. See Ferguson, *Ibid.*, 13.

for example, are convincing and it can be challenging at times to identify the artist amid her newly adopted communities.

The adaptability of Lee's selfhood throughout *Projects* has resulted in many critics positioning her as a cultural 'chameleon' of sorts who is able to seamlessly alter personae with ease. As such, Lee's photographs serve as verification of the artist's "...uncanny ability to become an integral part of an extraordinarily diverse set of social situations...group after group of people who give every indication that Lee is a longtime friend..."⁷⁹ Scholar Cherise Smith criticizes this chameleon-esque interpretation of Lee's photographs and cites such analysis as evidence of a larger discourse that seeks to undermine the multitude of circumstances that forms an individual identity. Can becoming a yuppie be as easy as parting your hair a different way and adopting a fluffy lapdog, or can an adult Korean immigrant pose as Japanese youth without anyone being the wiser? As Smith has noted, it is an easy leap for critics to see identification as "merely a matter of choice" and frame what the scholar calls "postidentity discourse."⁸⁰ Indeed, rather than portraying an unknown, anonymous, and yet still familiar character as in *Untitled Film Stills*, *Projects* positions real people as characters and in doing so, Lee presents subcultures, ethnicities, sexuality and other cultural markings as props. These images remove the agency of the other subjects and mock the historical and social circumstances that surround the formation of their identity as they have lived it. But perhaps that is Lee's point. The *Projects* images suggest that humans *can* shed their identities the way a snake can shed its skin but only if they choose to do so and that choice is *theirs* to make. In this interpretation, Lee is suggesting the

⁷⁹ Ferguson, "Let's be Nikki," 11.

⁸⁰ Smith, *Enacting Others*, 189. The "postidentity discourse" Smith describes is to return to a "universal humanism wherein so-called particularist identity groups...and their political and social aims are deemed outmoded, superfluous, and even dangerous to the integration and equality that have been achieved in the United States." Smith defines these "so-called particularist identity groups" as including, but not limited to, "feminists, racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities."

identities the other subjects assume (their day-to-day identity) is one that they have chosen and not the product of societal effects.

Curator Russell Ferguson explains Lee's approach and process in staging these photographs as a time intensive effort both in research and transformation: "For each project, Lee identifies a particular group in society and infiltrates it over a period of weeks or months. She will drastically alter her hair, her weight, her clothes... she will take on the mannerisms, the gestures... of the group she has chosen."⁸¹ Ferguson is not alone in describing Lee's methods in this fashion. Many of the critical reviews of Lee's *Projects* discuss this quasi-scientific or anthropological approach that characterizes the artist's methods. However, the ethnographic or anthropological undertones to Lee's work have also been critiqued. Historian Louis Kaplan describes *Projects* as an "artistic version of the anthropologist's 'going-native,'" but suggests Lee's artistic practice performs "rites of passing" rather than the anthropologist's "rites of passage."⁸² Miwon Kwon's article "Experience vs. Interpretation" also looks at Lee's "going native" methodologies but is more critical of the artist's approach. Kwon does not see *Projects* as an attempt to challenge societal stereotypes but rather she argues that it "reduces subcultures to a set of stylish scenes and identity-negotiations to a series of outfits."⁸³ Further, the documentary photography 'look' *Projects* employs, Kwon argues, emphasize the "tired and true technique of modern ethnographic authority – 'you are there...because I was there.'"⁸⁴ Kwon's interpretation alludes to a connection between perspectives associated with various methods of photography

⁸¹ Ferguson, "Let's Be Nikki," 7.

⁸² Louis Kaplan, "Performing Community: Nikki S. Lee's Photographic Rites of Passing," in *American Exposures: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 173.

⁸³ As summarized by Smith, *Enacting Others*, 209. For the full extent of Kwon's argument see "Experience vs. Interpretation: Traces of Ethnography in the World of Ian Tuazon and Nikki S. Lee." *Site-Specificity – the Ethnographic Turn*, ed. Alex Coles, (London: Black Dog Press, 2000), 74-91.

⁸⁴ Kwon, "Experience vs. Interpretation," 87.

(documentation) and the associations that accompany them ('otherness'). As such, we begin to see a linkage between Lee's *Projects* and the projective, even colonialist, gaze.

As noted thus far, a plain narrative of critical review that surrounds Lee's procedure positions her as a conceptual artist that performs personae to be captured and read through the camera's projective eye. Lee has stated in various interviews that before she takes any photographs, the people included in the series' images are notified about her work as an artist and that her presence is a means to create an art *project* (from which it is clear that the series gained its name). To be clear, the project Lee undertook acts as a conceptual act of body art that translates ethnicities, sexualities, age, and classes into a performance while the resultant photographs dutifully document the convergence of art and life that takes shape. Lee is represented in the photographs, but (unlike Sherman) does not serve as the photographer of the images in her series. Indeed, to be present in the photographs Lee depends on someone else to capture the scene with an amateur point-and-shoot camera. In the early phases of *Projects*, Lee's friend, Soo Hyun Ahn, photographed a majority of the images and later, as the effort progressed, the artist increasingly relied on bystanders to capture the scene.⁸⁵ As such, the photographer, as photo-taker, functions as eyewitness to Lee's real-time performances. However, it is the final photographic realization that makes the scene familiar for the viewer, not necessarily its origins in Lee's performative acts. For example, *The Young Japanese (East Village) Project (7)* [Fig. 31] appears to be very similar to any kind of snap-shot photograph a person would take for private, personal use of their friends or family in terms of composition, content, and perspective. It shows three women, standing side by side on a sidewalk, just outside the entryway to a store, and that seem to have briefly stopped to take a picture before they off to their next errand. All three

⁸⁵ Ferguson cites Soo Hyun Ahn as a "friend" of the artist and the primary photographer in the early *Projects* images. See Ferguson, "Let's Be Nikki," 7.

women face the camera, huddling close to one another, composed in traditional full-length pose. For the viewer, this resulting photograph is the end product; the document of a performance that allegedly took place based on the image's status and realization as an art object. As such, a hierarchy develops regarding the plurality of these performances that places the initial event at a lesser importance than subsequently derived viewing of the final photograph. What happens during Lee's transient forays into these communities only serves as the means to the ends – it is not the experience (or performance) that forms the persona but the visualization (or documentation) of it. In other words, Lee's images suggest that identity is not the result of a life lived but a life visually portrayed through images. Despite this potential hierarchy, can more be determined from these originating performances? What do Lee's performances leading up to these images actually entail and what can this process suggest about the artist's intentions?

The *Projects* photograph discussed in the introduction of this paper, *The Punk Project (1)* [Fig. 2], was taken by Lee's friend Soo Hyun Ahn and depicts the artist sandwiched among a posse of young American 'punks.' Simon Doom, a musician and periodic contributor to *VICE* magazine, was one of those punks in the photograph and recalls a different and less poetic artistic process than the activities outlined by Ferguson and other critics. Doom commented:

One Saturday, I was approached by a small, leather-clad Asian woman who claimed she was a 'Punk from Japan.' She wanted to take a photo with 'American Punks to show all her friends.' She gave me and my friends a couple dollars each, had her associate take the photo, bowed politely, and left.⁸⁶

Admittedly, Doom's recollection is suspect. Lee is Korean but it is possible that she could have introduced herself as Japanese if 'Japanese Punk' was the persona she was trying to portray to

⁸⁶ Simon Boom, "Part-Time Punks – Simon Boom was Not Fooled by Nikki S. Lee," in *VICE*, Oct. 8, 2012. The credibility of this particular contributor could be questionable but as a news organization, *VICE* has a reputable association with HBO Documentaries and is cited by other news organizations. This testimony is primarily used to show the possible variables in Lee's artistic process that is not as holistic as originally described. Doom identifies himself as the young man with the blue Mohawk to the immediate right of Lee.

the young men included in the photograph. The prospect of offering the other figures in the image to pose for money, just as any artist would pay a professional model, complicates Lee's credibility as a seamlessly adaptable conceptual artist. This interaction shows that Lee's attempts to perform a community identity where she is essentially unidentifiable as an outsider are not as seamless as they appear. The actions Doom outlines suggest Lee's interactions and performances of stereotypical personae are more closely aligned to a kind of cultural "cosplay" (or costume play) and aligns Lee's work with Cherise Smith's critique of "postidentity discourse."⁸⁷ Further, if Lee indeed introduced herself as a kind of cultural tourist planning to share the photograph in an intimate exchange between friends, her efforts were dishonest in her efforts when she later used the photograph as an art object. However, *The Punk Project* was one of Lee's first subseries within the larger *Projects* effort and this early methodology could have developed into the meticulous and near systematic approach that Ferguson describes.⁸⁸

Aside from Lee's performative process, the aesthetic and stylistic elements of the *Projects* images carry their own complications and interpretations. Some images recall amateur photos while other images are strikingly professional in composition and perspective. Throughout the series, Lee left the red timestamp in the lower right hand corner of each photograph. The timestamp in these works function as a "... mark of the real, of the specificity of a time and place, the evidence of a precise moment when a group of people were together."⁸⁹ Lee's inclusion of timestamps and her interest in casual group poses make use of a visual

⁸⁷ Cosplay, or "costume play," is a contemporary cultural phenomenon that originated in Japan where fans of fantasy-based video games, anime, comic books and other forms of mass media dress up in elaborate costumes and role play as specific characters from those sources. See Smith, *Enacting Others*, 43 for the full definition of "postidentity discourse."

⁸⁸ I am suggesting *The Punk Project* is one of the first in the *Projects* series based on the dates associated with these images and the layout of the *Nikki S. Lee: Projects* catalogue. Also see Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others*, 193. Smith chronologically outlines the first four 'projects' as *The Drag Queen Project*, *The Punk Project*, *The Young Japanese (East Village) Project*, and *The Tourist Project*.

⁸⁹ Ferguson, "Let's Be Nikki," 11.

vocabulary that the artist appropriates from the genre of amateur photography to reinforce a sense of candidness and reality in her images. Cherise Smith suggests that this vocabulary engages, and works within, the visualities and histories of documentary photography and more specifically the genre's contemporary spinoffs -- street photography and snapshot photography.⁹⁰ The former mode is typically a professional pursuit and depicts candid, spontaneous scenes of people in everyday public occurrences. Meanwhile, the latter approach is typically understood as a personal, amateur endeavor that documents an immediate and private happening. In both cases, images in these styles of documentary photography suggest an authentic scene, a real moment, or a captured memory that only the camera is able to depict. Lee's use of street and snapshot photographic aesthetics and the visual vocabulary of these specific types of photography ultimately serve as the main signifiers for the sense of reality and the *familiar* in these works.

Reviewing any number of images from *Projects* would help visualize the stylistic elements that constitute the aforementioned 'looks' of amateur snapshots and street photography. *The Hispanic Project* (27) [Fig. 24], for example, is one image that recalls the subject matter and composition of a snapshot. In this photograph, Lee is once again meshed in between figures of a group (in this case, an ethnic group) whose purported cultural identity frames the artist's performed character as part of the same context. The subseries' title, *The Hispanic Project*, reinforces the persona Lee mimics, but it also suggests the cultural construction of racial identities – an idea that will later be analyzed in more depth. *The Hispanic Project* (27) shows Lee on a beach boardwalk wearing frayed jean shorts and a neon green bikini top that exposes a temporary rose tattoo above her right breast. A tattooed, shirtless man beside her props up one of Lee's legs and firmly grasps her thigh with his right hand. Another bare-chested young man sits

⁹⁰ Smith, *Enacting Others*, 213 - 215. Smith examines the various stylizations of documentary photography that Lee employs and suggests the appearance of a sense of relationship between the artist and the "others" is the result of this mode of photography.

on the railing of the boardwalk, holding a boom box in one hand and leaning in towards Lee with the other. All three are smiling and posing for the picture-taker. There is an intimacy in this image that suggests a personal, and subtly sexual, connection between the subjects where there is none. The whole photograph functions as document of their relationship and looks very similar to the kind of snapshot memento that any beachgoers would have taken. However, there is one major exception – the relationship between Lee and the other figures are merely a construction.

By contrast, *The Ohio Project* (28) [Fig. 25] conveys a heightened professional quality that is more reminiscent of documentary street photography. Lee is shown alone, at half-length, standing in the center of the photograph's frame. She is wearing a blue and white polka-dot vest and blouse combo that is reminiscent of 1950s cowgirl costumes. Her direct, deadpan gaze confronts the viewer while a spherical iron cage (complete with daring motorcyclists) illuminates the night sky behind her. There is nothing that appears amateurish, coincidental, or personal about this photograph. It is deliberate and one of the few photographs in the series that shows Lee alone. The interpersonal intimacy seen in *The Hispanic Project* (27) is gone but *The Ohio Project* (28) still appears to be plucked from a real happening, but only captured by a different kind of photographer. This evaluation implies that the aesthetics of Lee's photographs also work to suggest specific information about who is behind the camera rather than only the figures that are depicted in front of it. This professional aesthetic suggests the picture-taker has an elevated comprehension of photographic composition and lighting. This information multiplies the photograph's function. Rather than a picture that documents the social relationships of alleged friends on a boardwalk, *The Ohio Project* (28) serves as a picture that performs a deliberate expressive act. The look and aesthetics of the photographs in *Projects* allow for these kind of varied readings from image to image, and photographer to photographer.

In addition to deciding who takes the picture, Lee also determines when to hand over control of the camera to the photographer in question. While there are indications that Lee identifies the select scenes she wants to portray and when to ask for a picture, she is unable to control the actions of the other figures within the frame. A closer examination of the entire series reveals that the picture-taking process in fact dictates the much of the context of the *Projects* photographs. This is particularly noticeable in photographs that depict Lee and other figures returning the extradiagetic gaze between subject and viewer. In these images, learned social behaviors associated with sitting for photographs or posing for the camera governs the content of the images. For example, *The Yuppie Project (17)* [Fig. 29] shows Lee's character mirroring the actions and demeanor of the two suit-clad white males with whom she inhabits the frame. All three participants are posing for a photograph and as such they look towards the camera, present gleaming smiles and hold perfectly poised posture. In asking for the photograph at that time and within that context, Lee's image manifests the behaviors people adopt when sitting for the camera. In other photographs, however, Lee seems less in control of when the picture is taken – for example, in *The Skateboarders Project (29)* [Fig. 30]. Here, a dreadlocked Lee sits on a low wall, feet propped up on a skateboard, beside a young man who crouches down near her. In the foreground, a male skateboarder is shown mid-jump. Not one of the three subjects acknowledges the camera and the image feels less forced, even candid. It is these kind of assumedly frank images that most resemble snapshots while the former photographs act as clichés of snapshots. Both images, and many others in *Projects*, use photography to comment on the cultural phenomena and learned behaviors that have developed in the medium's wake. Without the photographic medium and the cultural practices that have developed around it, this element of

the world's visual culture, these ways of seeing people in images, would not exist. Ultimately, *Projects* shows all viewers what we *really* look like in front of the camera's lens.

As seen in *Untitled Film Stills*, the overt human subject is of lesser importance than the interest in calling attention to the visual language of photography. In both series the content is developed to encourage a critical response to the projective eye but Lee's work departs from mass media imagery to focus instead on the readily used personal camera's role in solidifying cultural visualizations of identity. Lee also uses the politics and vocabulary of documentary photography to a specific end. According to Smith, the tradition of appropriating the documentary style was a regular tactic for early conceptualist artists who used it as "evidence of...[their] prioritization of the idea behind, and actions involved in, the making of an object over its final or physical form."⁹¹ This allowed those artists to produce works that subvert the "commodity-status of art-works and the cult of artistic originality."⁹²

However, Lee's practice is solidly positioned in creating art works that are intended for commodity use and gallery display. In an interview with Smith, Lee specifically calls herself a "conceptualist," and Smith suggests this deliberate self-positioning indicates the artist's "prioritization of the ideas behind her work over the end-products."⁹³ But is this really the case? Ferguson has argued that Lee works to eliminate "too much intentionality" in her photographs by passing off the camera to a friend or bystander, there is a sense of deliberateness in these images that suggest otherwise.⁹⁴ In preparing for the production of each subseries within *Projects*, Lee states that she creates a "predetermined list of...scenes that she wants" and exercises control over

⁹¹ Smith, *Enacting Others*, 213.

⁹² Ibid., 213.

⁹³ Lee as quoted in Smith, *Enacting Others*, 214. Secondary quote is Smith's analysis, see *Enacting Others*, 214.

⁹⁴ Ferguson, "Let's Be Nikki," 9.

her own poses, costumes and demeanors for each character or persona she performs.⁹⁵ Lee also determines when to ask the photographer to take the picture and in this sense functions as an artistic director. In handing the camera to a friend or stranger, Lee is turning over control to another and therefore relying more on the concept behind *Projects* than the resulting images. The authorship of Lee's images, in terms of production, is undoubtedly blurred but Lee's ambitions to create an art commodity still remains. Lee set out to create a serial *project* with images that function as "convincing works of art," so once again we see an emphasis on the art object rather than the originating performances.⁹⁶ The juxtaposition between initial concept and art object is further agitated when considering the series' various forms of installation and printed reproductions. For example, the small, snapshot size of the reproduced images in the *Nikki S. Lee* monograph align select photographs with those you would encounter in someone's family photo album. However, when *Projects* is installed for an exhibition, the images are shown in their enlarged gallery proportions that reject any sense of the amateur.⁹⁷ These gallery-produced images are signed by the artist, printed on Fujiflex photographic paper, that includes a large, unprinted, white segment of film to serve as built-in matting for the photographs.⁹⁸ This visual evidence reinforces Lee's interest in producing photographs that are deliberately constructed and displayed as art objects. This supports an interpretation of Lee's images as a reinforcement of the

⁹⁵ Lee as cited in Ferguson, "Let's Be Nikki," 9.

⁹⁶ Ferguson, "Let's Be Nikki," 8.

⁹⁷ The images in the collection at the National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA), Washington, D.C. from the *Projects* series were all approximately 30 x 40 inches, unframed. This works included *The Ohio Project* (8); *The Hispanic Project* (18); *The Yuppie Project* (4); *The Young Japanese Project* (1); *The Hip Hop Project* (1); and *The Tourist Project* (10).

⁹⁸ Further, of the images in NMWA's collection, all were hand-signed by Lee either on the identification label on the back of the framed works or with handwritten identifications on the back of the unframed prints. See [Fig. 26 and 27].

stereotypes she performs and uses the identities of the other figures in the photographs to create an art project.

However, the installation of these works also serves as another point of divergence between Lee and Sherman's artistic practices. In fact, Sherman's interest in disrupting any possible narrative in the installation of *Untitled Film Stills* is ultimately reversed in *Projects*. Lee installs each subseries so that they are all grouped together. Whereas Sherman would opt to display her various 'city girl' images separate from each other, Lee, on the other hand, would encourage all her *The Ohio Project* images to be installed together. For Lee, the relevance of the serial format in this manner relates back to the subseries she creates. In grouping the subseries together, rather than interspersed, the particular races, ethnicities, genders and other social markers depicted in Lee's in the various subsections are used to define the 'otherness' through their illustrated differences. On one hand, Lee wants her viewers to frame their own narratives and the apparent random numerical labeling that is attached to each image in a particular subseries' title further supports that (rather than a chronological system for example). However, in providing subcategories to the *Projects* series, she segments the concepts from one another, allowing them to define, through difference, the other images and thus the other figures within those images. Lee's comments regarding the installation of the series further elucidates her reasoning for this:

When I show the work, I prefer putting a lot of photographs together. If I show just one project or one photograph, people probably don't get what I'm doing. You can't have one without the others – they're all connected. *The Punk Project* has to be with *The Yuppie Project*, *The Lesbian Project* and other projects – that's what makes *The Punk Project* really look Punk. The projects support and define one another. I don't necessarily see a sequence in my work, and my images don't have an order, but people can make their own story when they see my work.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Nikki S. Lee as quoted in Vicario, "Conversation with Nikki S. Lee," 100 – 101.

This idea also correlates to ideas of intersubjectivity that Amelia Jones outlined in terms of Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* that was discussed in the closing of chapter two. Lee's photographs function in juxtaposition to each other and it is through repeatedly recognizing Lee among the various communities in the images that the concept behind *Projects* is revealed. Whereas Sherman's acknowledgement of the projective eye in *Untitled Film Stills* relates to the viewer's intersubjectivity in accepting a gendered reading of woman, *Projects* looks to the other figures and cultural environments that exist within the frame. In doing so, the intersubjectivity shifts from a dialogue between subject and viewer to one between subject (Lee's character) and subject (the other figures). *Projects* offers a new kind of intersubjectivity that relies the viewer's interpretation of the relationships inside the frame and how they relate to the other images within the whole of the series to realize the sums of its parts.

In order for the viewer to fully recognize these relationships, Lee effectively creates an aestheticized intimacy between herself and the other figures in these images that overtly suggest a mutual affection. Many images in *Projects* show physical human touch between figures, as seen in the earlier analysis of *The Hispanic Project* (27) [Fig. 24], while other images depict Lee alone, such as *The Ohio Project* (28) [Fig. 25]. These two works highlight additional repeating elements within the series that relate to Lee's efforts create intersubjectivity within the frame and among the segmented subseries. Many of the amateur-like works in the series depend on human touch to authenticate a sense of community and relations. Considering all of the images from the twelve subseries reproduced in *Nikki S. Lee: Projects*, thirty-three of the photographs show Lee and another subject physically touching. In nearly all the images where Lee is shown with other people there is a clear physical proximity that suggests an intimacy inherent in snapshot photography.

With the exception of some of Lee's earliest works, *The Punk Project* and *The Young Japanese (East Village) Project*, each subseries includes an image of Lee alone or as the primary subject. Only eighteen images within the *Nikki S. Lee: Projects* monograph (which includes nearly 100 of Lee's *Projects* photographs) depict Lee as the lone subject. These rare images allow viewers to examine the persona Lee creates for the intended subseries without the other figures to authenticate the identity she performs.¹⁰⁰ Rather than depend on the figures or environments that surround her, these images shift the images' subject matter more closely to a study of the artist enwrapped in the performative character she creates for the camera rather than the larger embodied subcultures Lee's subseries examine.

In the photographs where Lee is featured alone, it is easy to once again consider how self-representational images challenge the long held tradition and genre of self-portraiture. If it is agreed that Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #62* can be considered as the lone self-portrait in the *Untitled Film Still* series, perhaps these images of Lee, shown alone and in the midst of her conceptual performance, could also be read as self-portraits. As previously referenced, Lee admits that "...changing myself is a part of my identity," and as such, these images emphasize the artist's identity as a performer captured in the act of performance.¹⁰¹ One particular image of Lee, *The Exotic Dancers Project (23)* [Fig. 28], touches on similar ideas that surround my earlier interpretation of *Untitled Film Still #62*. *The Exotic Dancers Project (23)* is one of the most challenging images in the series but it could also be considered as the utmost portrayal of Lee's identity as a performative artist. The photograph shows Lee seated on a chair in the dressing room of a strip club with her platform-heeled feet propped up on the vanity in front of her. She

¹⁰⁰ These 18 images are only accounting for the twelve sub-series of *Projects* that are included in the *Nikki S. Lee: Projects* monograph.

¹⁰¹ Nikki S. Lee as quoted in Vicario, "Conversation with Nikki S. Lee," 100.

wears a blue dress that is pulled down at the waist, exposing her breasts, and a black garter on her upper thigh; a smoldering cigarette rests in her hand. Lee's expression is somewhere between exhaustion, annoyance, and disinterest but she does not divert her eyes from the camera; her gaze is assertive, challenging the viewer, in her frank stare. While this may not be the only self-portrait that can be identified in referencing Lee's identity as a practicing conceptual performance artist, it is certainly one of the more explicit. In other words, this reading does not suggest *The Exotic Dancers Project (23)* depicts Lee in her natural state but rather that this photograph depicts the toll of her artistic process most evidently. Every character she creates takes something from Lee and leaves something within her. *The Exotic Dancers Project (23)* shows Lee in her role as artist in the same way Sherman's identity is uncovered in *Untitled Film Still #62*. Both images show Lee and Sherman in the act of artistic creation and within a space that could be seen to function as an artists' studio.

When she began the series in 1997, Lee sought out and performed characters from four separate communities. First, as a drag queen, followed by a punk, a Japanese youth, and then a tourist.¹⁰² In *Enacting Others*, Cherise Smith argues that the obvious dissimilarities between the 'looks' of these groups distract viewers from recognizing their correlations. Specifically, Smith identifies that all the groups are locatable within Manhattan, the New York borough in which Lee lived and worked at the time of the series' genesis. Further, these groups follow "an idiosyncratic dress code that functions both as a boundary, enabling members to communicate members to one another, and as a dividing line, separating out nonmembers."¹⁰³ Lastly, Smith suggests that the subseries' broad titles allow a general, yet particular reading of a cultural group

¹⁰² Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others*, 193. Smith chronologically outlines these first four 'projects' in this order.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 196.

that allows “the viewer to relate to the images’ subjects in a commoditized way.”¹⁰⁴ Smith sees the beginning of *Projects*, and in turn the series as a whole, as a whitewashing of cultural identity and part of a larger discourse that seeks to reduce “the politics of identity.”¹⁰⁵ The ‘chameleon’ dialogue discussed earlier is then seen more critically as “...a lack of recognition of, or perhaps, disregard for, the historic, social, cultural, and economic circumstances of the identities she performs.”¹⁰⁶

Smith’s analysis takes us back to a question posed earlier as well as proposes several others: Does *Projects* break down cultural stereotypes or reinforce them? Are Lee’s images identifying prejudices and, in calling attention to them, rendering them powerless or reconfirming their marginalization? Could subcultures, ethnicities, genders, sexualities, and even age merely come down to the clothes one wears, the friends that surround them, and other trite external markers? Lee’s *Projects* asks these questions but the answers are more challenging to identify.

While Lee’s exploration of identity in *Projects* often positions her as the protagonist, just as Sherman in *Untitled Film Stills*, the environment that is also included within the frame, in addition to the artist herself, is just as important as the images’ context. The various *Projects*’ subseries use their visual differences to further refine those contexts and thus characterize the other subseries as well as the diverse personae Lee performs within them. The formation of identity has been linked to the influence of social stereotypes promoted by television, print media and cinema. These popular cultural forms produce narrowly defined human typology that promotes social prejudices such as racism, sexism and homophobia. For Lee, however, these simplified human ‘types,’ established through photographic imagery, function as the means to

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 196.

¹⁰⁵ Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others*, 190.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 197-198.

illustrate the interconnectivity of identity through association. While *Projects* plays into stereotypes as much as Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, Lee is heavily relying on the dynamics of the group to determine personal identity and the way the camera captures such identities. Both series, however, use the aesthetics and visual language of picture-taking in powerful ways. The artists' shared manipulation of the photography's indexicality to communicate the divide between the real thing being photographed and its image, transform the way photographic self-representation is understood.

CHAPTER 4

FACE TO FACE: CONSIDERING THE PHOTOGRAPH IN

UNTITLED FILM STILLS AND PROJECTS

After examining *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* at length, what can be determined about the two projects when Sherman and Lee's works are considered face to face – so to speak? The analysis presented has illustrated that Sherman and Lee both perform roles and adopt clothing, props, and the pictorial likeness of various cultural stereotypes. They both employ 'dress-up,' mimicry, and masquerade to depict an identity that exists outside their own but despite these notable similarities, the two artists also differ considerably in practice. Sherman acts out her performative works in a controlled studio setting; Lee mimics a diverse range of cultural roles in their real-life environments. Sherman fills the photograph with her lone image; Lee is depicted within a group assembly. However, none of these methodologies are absolute and many images in these series present exceptions to these rules. While it is clear that *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* engage with theatricality and artifice in their imagery, the photographs that document their respective performances remain as a documentary trace of what was. As John Pultz has succinctly noted, photography is "the most widespread means of visual communication of the past century and a half...[and] has done more than any other medium to shape our notions of the [human] body in modern times."¹⁰⁷ As such, the artists' engagement with the photographic medium, and its perceived connection to reality, continues to complicate many of the postmodern quandaries that have thus far been highlighted surrounding *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects*. Sherman and Lee turned to photography as a means to expand the reach of their performative efforts, but the resulting photographs also allowed for further interpretations of their work. *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* place currency on the photograph's ability to

¹⁰⁷ John Pultz, *The Body and the Lens: Photography 1839 to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 7.

obscure distinctions between fact and fiction and to merge representations of the artist and subject. Both series remind viewers that photographs do not have to be true to appear real, or in other words, that photography is just as capable of representational manipulation as any other art form. In doing so, these two artists point back to the camera as a tool of systematic visual representation that contributes to the *familiar* personae Sherman and Lee present in their images. The mechanical processes of the photographic medium allow both artists to test viewers' interpretation of 'reality' as well as question the very origins of the cultural framework that constructs human identity. As such, photographic theory and the medium's social investment serve as primary source for the content- and aesthetic-decisions that created *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects*.

As previously discussed, the photograph's function as a testament to what was once visually present in front of the camera lens is reconsidered in *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* as both efforts present a disconnect between notions of a photographic record and the artists' staged images. For many viewers, however, this disconnect may not be as apparent and on first glance many of the photographs from either series appear to be autonomous from outside controls. For example, consider the visual exercise conducted at the opening of this study. What would a viewer see or understand when hypothetically examining Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #21* [Fig. 1] or Lee's *The Punk Project (1)* [Fig. 2] in a gallery, without any prior knowledge of the artists' presence? Would they recognize that the photographs were not deliberate film stills or group portraits? Would their reaction change if they distinguished the repeating inclusion of Sherman and Lee's likeness throughout the separate bodies of work? Could they identify specific photographic elements that create such ambiguity in these two series? The genre of staged photography that both artists engage operates within the realm of fabrication while at the same

time the mechanical means of the camera assures an authentic documentation of real-time, factual events. Lee's images would not inherently suggest to an unknowing viewer that the photographed scene was a performance anymore than a snapshot of a real group of teenage friends. Similarly, Sherman's tightly cropped photograph of a young woman could just as easily be understood as a bust-length portrait as it could be interpreted as a document of performance art. *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* successfully operate within this balance of fact and fiction – a realization that can only be created through photographic means.

Ultimately, the camera's technical processes allows for this hybridization of factual visual representations and manipulated contexts. More than any other medium, photography implicitly camouflages its expressive and artistic ends. To capture the images for *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects*, light had to pass through the lens of the camera and transpose an image from the real scene to film, and then finally developed into a tangible object. The fictive content of the images in *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* remain 'real' in the fundamental sense of physical representation however the captured scenes are artificial. Perhaps that is part of the reason why both artists sought to use photography to document their performative actions. The presumption of reality that accompanies the photographic process also heightens expectations for factual portrayals; however, Sherman and Lee undermine these basic conceptions to create images that impersonate the way the world is seen through photographs. Looking at Sherman's work, Rosalind Krauss argues that the photograph uncovers "the multiplicity, the facticity, the repetition and stereotype at the heart of *every* aesthetic gesture" so that both the artist's medium (photography) and content (stereotypes of female identities in Sherman's case) point back to the visual culture that created it.¹⁰⁸ Ultimately, the quandary of 'realness' in both Sherman and Lee's

¹⁰⁸ Krauss, "A Note on Photography and the Simulacral," 176.

photographs serves as the means to the ends, allowing the perceived facts to awaken viewers to their own participation in the societal authority granted to the photographic image.

The artists' decision to use the camera as the means to document their performances opens further analysis to the theoretical modes of interpretation that surrounded postmodern photography. John Pultz argues that photography originally emerged as a "tool of the Enlightenment" that "reproduce[d] the position of a privileged, unique Enlightenment subject: the observer apart, freely viewing some object or scene."¹⁰⁹ And despite this, or perhaps because of it, photography's origins as an apparatus of reason and document of modern reality were later complicated in the postmodern era. Pultz's particular analysis of Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci's theoretical writings shed light on the changing ideas that Sherman and Lee's images actively engage. Rather than "a tool under our control," Pultz argues that Foucault identified the camera as an instrument that governed society with "the images produced through it becoming additional means of control."¹¹⁰ Pultz aligns Foucault's evaluation with Gramsci's analysis, positioning the camera as "an 'apparatus of ideology' used by a ruling class to establish and maintain its cultural hegemony."¹¹¹ If we accept these two postmodern theorists' analyses, the staged photographic images in *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* can be understood as part of these postmodern efforts that call attention to the photography's role in producing "a whole series of power relationships that exist within society, especially those of gender, race and class."¹¹² This concept extends further with Lee's *Projects* to address diverse race and class

¹⁰⁹ Pultz, *The Body and the Lens*, 9.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 9.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 10.

¹¹² Ibid., 10

identities rather than the female-specific societal categorizations that are explored in *Untitled Film Stills*.

In earlier discussions, this thesis has framed various ways both series disrupt, but also reintroduce, accepted cultural categorizations and stereotypes that include and extend beyond the cultural identities that Pultz describes. Indeed, both series appear to collectively define a broader range of cultural and gender identities that are impacted by photography's 'power relations' as well as pinpoint the photographic sources that helped establish them. As Fiona Carson and Claire Pajackowska have noted, the role of photography in the production of various culturally constructed social identities creates "politics of representation" that both series confront.¹¹³ Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* particularly contributes to what Carson and Pajackowska have discussed regarding photography's role in signifying femininity as "...masquerade, something that had to be endlessly performed and reinvented."¹¹⁴ While Sherman and Lee use different approaches to address the camera's ability to construct modern consciousness and personification, both appropriate the 'look' and personae of different constructions of gender, race, age, sex, and class identities that have been produced through mass media, commercial photography and amateur photographs. In doing so, both artists present familiar cultural characters that challenge the viewer to reconsider the originating narratives from which such associations emerge. Rather than simply acknowledge power relations, Sherman and Lee use the photographic medium to focus viewers' attention on the sources from which such cultural associations emerge. Further, both artists build from their response to postmodern photographic theory to use the camera's physical and aesthetic properties that have framed such philosophies.

¹¹³ Carson and Pajackowska, eds., *Feminist Visual Culture*, 109.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 109.

With similar platforms or origins in postmodern photographic theory, Sherman and Lee fluctuate in the realization of their photographs. Indeed, *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* diverge in many technical aspects from the genres of photography they mimic and the amount of figures within the frame, to the kinds of stereotypes they perform and the authorship of the images they create. While both artists address similar organizational and aesthetic themes in photography, they often choose to emphasize different ends. This can be particularly noticeable when examining the artists' choices in the titling of their series, the various 'looks' and aesthetics of photographic genres and technologies, the engagement of the artists' own bodies in their images, and lastly, how using their physical likenesses complicates traditional understandings of self-portraiture and the artist-model, as well as artist-sitter, relationship. An analysis of these particular aspects of *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* will identify the elements of the artist's own selfhood and the photographic medium that Sherman and Lee use to examine the construction of human, and more specifically, female, identity.

First, a comparison of each series' titling procedure offers essential insight regarding the organizational structure of each effort. Where Sherman is ambiguous, Lee's explicit titles create various subseries within *Projects* and leave little room for interpretation. Using subtitles such as *The Lesbian Project* and *The Schoolgirls Project*, Lee makes explicitly clear the type of personae her characters mimic and reminds the viewer that these images do not depict a natural representation of the artist but rather a temporary 'project' that she pursued throughout the series. Sherman, by contrast, titled all her images *Untitled Film Still* with only numerical references to identify the separate images. As a result, early interpretations of Sherman's images had to contend with an ambiguity about exactly who or what was being photographed. Early critics were not sure if Sherman's characters were characters at all but rather cinematic parodies, film

stills, or self-portraits. Lee's very specific titling eliminates the guesswork from the viewer's first interaction and suggests that each *Projects* subseries should be interpreted in its own right as performance art. *Untitled Film Stills* is more fluid in its associations and the personae Sherman introduced in the collected images are not as concrete, at least in their organizational structure, as Lee's deliberate categorizations.

The artists' aesthetic structuring of their works serve as an additional foundation to comparatively evaluate *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects*. Both artists engage in conceptual and performative art and use photography to document their performances, however, they also rely heavily on the medium's visual vocabulary as critical source material. While both artists seem to capitalize on photographic genres' ability to communicate specific concepts, the types of genres they employ – such as stills, street, snap-shot, and documentary photography -- are markedly different. In Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* the 'look' of mass media and cinematic stills are used as a reference; in Lee's *Projects* the aesthetics of documentary photography is sourced; and in both, the use of pictorial cues from those specific genres convey additional information to the viewer that extend beyond the content of the images. The appropriation and mimicry of cinematic 'looks' in *Untitled Film Stills* uses mass media's own aesthetics to expose cultural constructions of female identity and ties such constructions back to the proliferation of contemporary imagery found in mass media, film, and advertising. Lee's documentary-like photographs on the other hand, make use of the visual vocabulary of amateur photography to reinforce a sense of candidness and reality that authenticate the fictive relationships in her images. As such, both Sherman and Lee's images suggest that the subject matter of these series derive not only from what is included within the photograph's frame but also from what can be gathered from the aesthetics of the medium's wide-ranging genres. The visual language of

photography itself functions as a visual source in both *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* and as such, the captured scenes communicate as much through aesthetic choices as they do through content. Regardless of the genres these two efforts work to replicate, the ‘look’ of *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* also suggest specific timeframes to the viewer and functions as additional means to decipher the artists’ shared, yet distinctive, goal of manipulating the photographic process.

Throughout the history of art, shifts in a medium’s equipment and tools can often signify a resulting work’s date as well as allow for certain artistic freedoms that impact the very content of the art created.¹¹⁵ Just as the genres of photography communicated specific nuances for the viewer in *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects*, the medium’s technological advancements also contributed to the various visual choices Sherman and Lee employed in their series. The images from *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects*, as mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, offer a nostalgia that stems solely from the photographs’ aesthetics and recalls an earlier, albeit familiar, time. Photography as an artistic medium is particularly subject to rapid technological changes and as such, these developments play a significant role in the way modern viewers read a photograph’s temporality. Therefore, photography’s advancements in mechanical reproduction align with many changes in the medium’s aesthetic representation, for example: the subtle black-and-white tonalities of long-exposure alkaline plates, the vintage hue of a Polaroid photo, or the rich details captured with high-definition digital cameras. As such, Sherman and Lee’s choices to depict a certain timeframe or era of photography additionally communicates larger contextual ideas to viewers. In manipulating and mimicking the ‘looks’ of certain decades of photography,

¹¹⁵ Consider, for example, the *en plein air* painting style and subject matter that the Impressionists employed thanks to revolutionary changes in oil paint storage (paint tubes). Prior to that technological change, painting outdoors (and, thus the artists’ observations of real-time, temporal changes in the landscape) was not possible. As the technology changed, so did the Impressionists painters’ content.

the viewer reads *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* in a time-specific manner.¹¹⁶ *Untitled Film Stills* portrayed various recognizable characters, through Sherman's likeness, that would remind contemporary viewers of 1950s female film noir characters or cinema typecasts despite being created between 1977 and 1980. The black-and-white film and the familiar yet retro personae would have offered a form of nostalgia for her contemporary audience but also allowed for a temporal distance. Meanwhile, each photograph in Lee's *Projects* includes the iconic red timestamps that show the exact date the picture was taken. The nostalgia only exists for later viewers of her work, as contemporary viewers would see the dates of the images in relatively real-time. What Sherman picked up on, and Lee later reinterpreted, is that the 'look' of photography communicates as much about a photograph as the actual content itself. As the camera apparatus advances, so do the aesthetics of the resulting images but even these technological cues can be mimicked and manipulated to serve as a fiction rather than fact. Considering the information provided through the genres and technology of the camera, it is clear that the aesthetics of photography, and the cultural associations that accompany them, have a life and a language all their own, and Sherman and Lee were fast to wield it.

Where photographic aesthetics have allowed for a deeper analysis of *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects*, they cannot account for the artists' parallel decisions to turn the cameras on their own bodies. Sherman and Lee are present in each and every image throughout both series. Their active, repetitive, and visible self-placement within the imagery explicitly complicates ideas of photographic self-representation and its impact on human identity. To construct their

¹¹⁶ Today this concept has seemed to run rampant with technological advancements of smartphone photography, digitally imposed filters, and artificial light. These filters carry their own weight as do the way smartphones are used to take pictures. Further, the method of using a smartphone to take self-portraits has seemed to grow into a cultural phenomenon. In 2013, 'selfie' was crowned *Oxford Dictionary's* word of the year. Ellen De Generes's star-studded selfie from the 2014 Oscars was viewed on such a large scale that it actually broke Twitter's server. The image was forwarded, or retweeted, more than 2 million times. According to NBC News, the smartphone photograph was estimated to be worth nearly \$1 billion dollars.

performances and highlight the aesthetics and representational systems of the camera, both Sherman and Lee relied on their own physical likenesses to highlight the idea of stereotype and simulacrum in their series. Carey Lovelace has argued that the power of using the “body as material and metaphor” further lends itself to the challenges presented earlier concerning the verisimilitude of the camera’s imagining process.¹¹⁷ Lovelace positions the body art of female artists as “a radical act, reclaiming the female nude from art history, where she’s been objectified, commodified, and composed from a male point of view...”¹¹⁸ As female artists exploring the cultural constructions of female identity, *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects* illustrate the artists’ decisions to insert their own bodies into each photograph and thus retain the agency of their female bodies. In choosing to use their own likeness as the primary subject in these images, Sherman and Lee use the visual language of picture-taking itself to incite a more critical reading of gendered representations in mass media imagery. However, Sherman’s legacy in this methodology places her *Untitled Film Stills* within the range of source material that Lee could have relied on to form her later *Projects*.

Thus far, it is easy to see the overlapping elements in the two series considering the comprehensive representational and aesthetic trajectories that both series appear to similarly adopt. The analysis suggests there is little doubt that *Projects* has indebtedness to *Untitled Film Stills*. Sherman’s legacy, for artists and scholars alike, often places any reference to identity, self-portraiture, and photography within the artist’s purview. But, are all photographers working with self-representation the legatees of Cindy Sherman? Lee herself does not acknowledge any lineage from Sherman’s work: “People ask me who my influences are – Nan Goldin, Cindy Sherman – but for me, it’s the people around me. My boyfriends, sisters, or friends I talk to. The

¹¹⁷ Carey Lovelace, “Flesh & Feminism,” *Ms.* Spring (2004), 65.

¹¹⁸ Lovelace, “Flesh & Feminism,” 65.

real people around me affect my work, not other artists. I'd seen Cindy Sherman's work at school, but I didn't really pay attention at that time."¹¹⁹ While Lee's influences could certainly stem from those immediately around her, it is hard to ignore the visual parallels between the two series. For example, many of the personae originally cast in *Untitled Film Stills* are alive and well in *Projects*: The sexed female body seen in both *Untitled Film Still #64* [Fig. 9] and *The Exotic Dancers Project (23)* [Fig. 28]; the innocent schoolgirl featured in *Untitled Film Still #14* [Fig. 14] as well as *The Schoolgirls Project (4)* [Fig. 32]; and, the elderly domestic figure suggested in *Untitled Film Still #47* [Fig. 33] and *The Seniors Project (21)* [Fig. 34], among others. In addition to repeated personae between the two series, the poses Sherman constructed in *Untitled Film Stills* can also be seen, consciously or unconsciously, in Lee's gestures for *Projects*. For example, in comparing Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #7* [Fig. 35] to Lee's *The Ohio Project (8)* [Fig. 36], both images show the artists portraying various characters that are enclosed within a doorframe. Sherman's character saunters from a sliding glass door and this pose is paralleled in Lee's photograph where the depicted persona grasps the sides of the door to lean her body outwards. Both characters tilt out of the doorways they respectively inhabit and both directly return the gaze of the camera, fully engaging with the picture-taker. Taken in 1999, Lee's work was photographed more than twenty years after Sherman captured *Untitled Film Still (#7)*.¹²⁰ While Lee's comments suggest a disconnect between Sherman's imagery and her own, these two pictures suggest otherwise and support the argument that *Projects* indeed engages within the same visual language and theories of postmodern identity construction and photography that are forged in *Untitled Film Stills*.

¹¹⁹ Lee as quoted in Vicario, "Conversation with Nikki S. Lee," 98.

¹²⁰ Sherman's image was taken in 1978.

However, the shared depiction of the artists' likenesses also works to complicate traditional parallels between photographic self-representation and self-portraiture. As discussed in chapters two and three, there are instances in both series where glimpses of self-portraiture can be seen. These photographs, namely *Untitled Film Still #62* [Fig. 22] and *The Exotic Dancer Project (23)* [Fig. 28], illustrate that while the artists mainly work in the realm of staged photography, the representational capabilities of the camera and the addition of the artists' likenesses in these series periodically forays into self-portraiture. However, by inserting their bodies into the images they create, Sherman and Lee are also reimagining the role of the model. Rather than dress another figure in costumes and instruct them to perform the character (or pose as the character), Lee and Sherman use their own bodies to illustrate their pictorial direction. Photography, in this case, frees the artist from the tradition of using an artist's model and instead allows the Sherman and Lee to physically enter the frame, reinforcing their authorship as both creative directors and subjects. Photography was a means for both Sherman and Lee to document their performances in a manner that allowed their likeness to take center stage. Both Sherman and Lee function as the primary subject in these images and, as such, minimize the dualistic relationship between artist and model.

Scholar Susan Waller has written extensively on the history of the artist's model and defines key terms that help frame the figurative traditions that Sherman and Lee's efforts redefine but also complement.¹²¹ Waller defines three types of models: the professional model,

¹²¹ See Susan Waller, "Realist Quandaries: Posing Professional and Proprietary Models in the 1860s," *The Art Bulletin* 89, No. 2 (June 2007). While the time period (leading up to the turn of the nineteenth century) of Waller's research and the medium of her inquiry vary from the subject at hand, there are essential elements of Waller's interpretation that shed light on the historical relationships between artist and model as well as artist and sitter that lay the groundwork for what Sherman and Lee's photographs will later engage.

the irregular model (*modèle à l'occasion*), and the proprietary model (*modèle privilégié*).¹²² The differences between these types of models are of particular interest when considering Sherman and Lee's physical presence throughout *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects*. Waller argues that artists' used professional models to maintain specific poses that fulfilled the artists' needs while irregular models "'posed' as themselves or as a familiar social type: the drunkard, the fifer..." and so on rather than pose or take on as a specific role.¹²³ While both professional and irregular models were paid to pose, they differ in the range of artificial identities they were asked to portray. Professional models were useful for the range of identities they could assume within the studio while irregular models were chosen for the authentic identities they possessed outside the studio. Waller's last type of model, the proprietary model, was not a paid employee but rather an associate or friend of the artist who sat for a painting but did not commission a work. Putting Sherman and Lee back into perspective, there appears to be similarities between the two contemporary artists' efforts and the types of models that Waller outlines. The aesthetic realizations of the images from *Untitled Film Stills*, for example, heighten the artificiality of cinematic female stereotypes (aligning with the professional model formula) while *Projects* mimics the authentic look of amateur photography (aligning with the irregular model formula but also introducing a collection of proprietary models as seen in the additional figures within her images). This evidence shows yet again Sherman and Lee's ability to transform and complicate traditional modes of artistic practice.

Interestingly, Rosalind Krauss also considers the paradigm surrounding model-artist relations that Sherman's work particularly continues to redefine:

¹²² See Waller, "Realist Quandaries: Posing Professional and Proprietary Models in the 1860s," 239. Waller suggests two notable changes among Realist painters that modified the "the artist-model transaction" and deviated from "the artist who directs the model's staged performance to one who captures a casual gesture."

¹²³ Ibid., 240.

If Sherman were photographing a model who was not herself, then her work would be a continuation...of artists as a consciousness which is both anterior to the world and distinct from it, a consciousness that knows the world by judging it. In that case we would simply say that Sherman was constructing a critical parody of the forms of mass culture.¹²⁴

However, Sherman did not opt to use a model. Krauss also notes that in order for Sherman's stereotypes to function, she also reveals "the artist herself as stereotypical," and refuses traditional notions of "the artist as a source of originality."¹²⁵ This rejects the longstanding Western tradition of the artist's "critical distance from a world...that [the artist] confronts but...is not a part."¹²⁶ Krauss' analysis identifies another important distinction between *Untitled Film Stills* and *Projects*. The 'what-if' scenario she describes, where Sherman would use a model rather than her sole likeness, becomes manifest, to a certain extent, in Lee's *Projects*. The other figures included within the *Projects*' photographs offer real-life visual representations of the subcultures Lee targeted for this series. These additional figures, therefore, function as irregular models, to borrow from Waller's term, and transgress into the scenario Krauss outlines above. While Lee is also including her own body in the frame, she reinforces her conscious participation in and authorship of these images as an artist who can appear similar to those around her but also clearly distinct from it. With this in mind, does Lee use the other figures in the frame to show her own being as "both anterior to the world and distinct from it" and as such a "critical parody" of the subcultures she captures on film?¹²⁷ The implications of this question position Lee's work in a precarious position.

¹²⁴ Krauss, "A Note on Photography and the Simulacral," 177.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 177.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 177.

¹²⁷ As quoted in the above block quotation. See Krauss, "A Note on Photography and the Simulacral," 177.

Despite the clear visual and theoretical lineage to Sherman's work and the artists' shared techniques, the scholarship surrounding these two photographers is often more dismissive of *Projects* than *Untitled Film Stills*. This presents another line of inquiry that should be considered as research into these two artists continues. Lee's direct linkage to Sherman's work could be responsible for the critical skepticism; however, this research shows that *both series* are indebted to a myriad of artistic traditions. Given the additional figures in the frame of Lee's photographs, the tone surrounding *Projects* is more likely a product of the critical response to the artist's methodology. Lee is not creating these photographs alone. Other figures inhabit her images that presumably are not performing personae but simply smiling for a picture-taker. In that sense, many scholars have interpreted Lee's work as exploitive. Whereas Sherman used her own body to provide commentary on the construction of gender identities, Lee involved innocent bystanders and individuals who may have only been partially aware of the artist's masquerade and intentions. In doing so, Lee employs transgressive issues of identity relating to race, ethnicity, sexuality and other areas of identity development that are more controversial today than Sherman's examination gender identity. Lee performs a host of characters that are framed within categorized sub-groupings of cultural, class, sexual, racial, and age parameters. This is perhaps the most significant difference between *Projects* and *Untitled Film Stills* and therefore must be considered as a decisive point of critical skepticism. However, just as in *Untitled Film Stills*, the overt human subject is of lesser importance than the overall commentary on the visual language of photography.

Conclusion

The visual photographic vocabularies that both series employ remain dependent on the interpretation of their viewers. Similarly, scholar Amelia Jones looks to the role of photography

in the oeuvre of Cindy Sherman and the “embodied subject” that emerges from “technologies of representation,” (the camera) and aligns it with the disembodied eye that reinforces the separation between photograph and viewer.¹²⁸ Similar to Pultz’s earlier analysis, Jones argues that the “mastering gaze” of Western patriarchal society was “mechanized through the apparatus of the camera...” and, as a result, “instrumentalizes the dualistic logic of Cartesian or Enlightenment concepts of subjectivity” that separate an industrialized, individualized, rationalized nation from the object being photographed.¹²⁹ It is within this history of “conquering...otherness through vision” and the projective gaze of the camera that Sherman and Lee’s photographs function.¹³⁰ But rather than play into it, these artists seize this history and manipulate it to awaken the viewer to society’s contribution (through acceptance and participation) of the omnipresent mastering gaze and the manifest stereotypes it creates.

¹²⁸ Jones, "Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman," 48. In this respect, Jones regards the ‘disembodied eye’ as a Cartesian of Enlightenment ideal.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 35.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 48.

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APPENDIX A: ILLUSTRATIONS

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